

A Fawcett Gold Medal Book

d1586

50c

THE MAGIC MAN

AND OTHER
SCIENCE-FANTASY
STORIES BY

CHARLES BEAUMONT

"A writer born to be good...You simply
never know where his love and
high excitement will take him next..."

— FROM THE FOREWORD BY

RAY BRADBURY

2-
READMORE BOOK STORE
3507 MERAMEC
SO. ST. LOUIS, MO. 63110

"Chuck Beaumont is no longer a new young writer, he is an established writer with a fine reputation among people who love to read excellently thought-out and put-together short tales. I no longer need to feel I may do him harm by standing up front of one of his books and getting in the way of the reader. . . .

"Some writers are one-idea people. Other writers, far rarer, far wilder, are pomegranates. They burst with seed. Chuck has always been a pomegranate writer. . . .

"Chuck has always been right in story judgment, in smelling out, choosing, and working with an idea, or expressing an enthusiasm. . . . He could be anything he chooses to be in this world . . ."

—from the Foreword by
Ray Bradbury

THE MAGIC MAN:

and other science-fantasy stories

CHARLES BEAUMONT

Foreword by RAY BRADBURY

Afterword by RICHARD MATHESON

GOLD MEDAL BOOKS

Fawcett Publications, Inc., Greenwich, Conn.
Member of American Book Publishers Council, Inc.

Copyright © 1965 by Fawcett Publications, Inc.

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book or portions thereof.

MISS GENTILBELLE. From *The Hunger And Other Stories*, Copyright © 1957 by Charles Beaumont.

THE LAST CAPER. From *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, Copyright © 1954 by Charles Beaumont.

THE NEW PEOPLE. From *Rogue Magazine*, Copyright © 1958 by Charles Beaumont.

THE VANISHING AMERICAN. From *Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Copyright © 1955 by Fantasy House, Inc.

THE MONSTER SHOW. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1956 by Charles Beaumont.

THE MAGIC MAN. Copyright © 1960 by Charles Beaumont.

A CLASSIC AFFAIR. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1955 by Charles Beaumont.

THE HUNGER. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1955 by H.M.H. Publishing Company, Inc.

BLACK COUNTRY. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1954 by H.M.H. Publishing Company, Inc.

THE LOVE-MASTER. From *Rogue Magazine*, Copyright © 1956 by Charles Beaumont.

THE DARK MUSIC. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1956 by H.M.H. Publishing Company, Inc.

FAIR LADY. From *The Hunger And Other Stories*, Copyright © 1957 by Charles Beaumont.

PERCHANCE TO DREAM. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1958 by Charles Beaumont.

THE CROOKED MAN. From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1955 by H.M.H. Publishing Company, Inc.

OPEN HOUSE. From *The Hunger And Other Stories*, Copyright © 1957 by Charles Beaumont.

LAST RITES. From *If Magazine*, Copyright © 1955 by Charles Beaumont.

THE MURDERERS. From *Esquire*, Copyright © 1955 by Esquire, Inc.

A DEATH IN THE COUNTRY. (former title: *The Deadly Will to Win*) From *Playboy*, Copyright © 1957 by Charles Beaumont.

All characters in this book are fictional and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Printed in the United States of America

Contents

Foreword by Ray Bradbury

MISS GENTILBELLE	13
THE LAST CAPER	31
THE NEW PEOPLE	42
THE VANISHING AMERICAN	63
THE MONSTER SHOW	74
THE MAGIC MAN	81
A CLASSIC AFFAIR	101
THE HUNGER	115
BLACK COUNTRY	130
THE LOVE-MASTER	152
THE DARK MUSIC	162
FAIR LADY	177
PERCHANCE TO DREAM	183
THE CROOKED MAN	192
OPEN HOUSE	201
LAST RITES	213
THE MURDERERS	228
A DEATH IN THE COUNTRY	241

Afterword by Richard Matheson

FOREWORD

Back in 1953, when I lived in Ireland and pursued a White Whale for John Huston, I received a letter from Chuck Beaumont asking me to write an Introduction to his first book of stories. I refused, as gently and honestly as I could. I felt then, and still feel, that an Introduction by an established writer can do more harm than good to a fledgling. People read such Introductions and figure that the Introducer has been bullied into it by his editor or publisher friends, or has done it out of a kind of log-rolling friendship. Beyond that, the reader himself feels bullied. He doesn't want to be told the stories are good, well-done, excellent-fine. He would like, thank you very much, to be left alone. He wants his own sense of surprise and discovery. He wants to run to friends and cry, Hey, I've just read something you must read! Word of mouth is everything. Introductions are, at best, a frail and dubious substitute.

But now twelve years have passed. Chuck Beaumont is no longer a new young writer, he is an established writer with a fine reputation among people who love to read excellently thought-out and put-together short tales. I no longer need to feel I may do him harm by standing up front of one of his books and getting in the way of the reader. Still, I am going to let the stories speak for themselves. I would much rather reminisce about the very young Charles Beaumont.

About twenty years ago I bumped into a gangling sixteen-year-old who, even then, looked as if he were privately haunted by some old pains or some other life. He was very pale, but his paleness belied his energy and exuberance with ideas and with life.

The first time we met we were both "fevering" our way through a bookstore, which means suffering from the Thomas Wolfe syndrome: all those books to be touched,

so few to be read, in a lifetime. Chuck was a cartoonist-illustrator then, enamored of the idea of one day drawing or painting for *Weird Tales* or *Astounding Science Fiction*. When he discovered I had hidden away a huge stack of *Terry and the Pirates* comic Sunday panels, he showed up at the house, did some fast horse-trading, and walked off happily in the night, the comics under his arm.

So, long before Pop Art loomed on the scene, we were drawn together by similar tastes and memories. And even though he was ten years younger than myself, he seemed to remember things out of my own childhood. We shared a keen appreciation of the best of radio which was soon to fade. Programs like *Vic and Sade*, *Easy Aces*, and *Columbia Presents Norman Corwin*. And, of course, we had both, at one time or another, belonged to various branches of Little Orphan Annie's Secret Society. We both collected, knew, and loved comic strips long before the Museum of Modern Art intellectualized them into an art-form and turned them into a highbrow commodity to be sold to the imagination-poor rich. Which is to say that Chuck and I were never poor. We had always loved and loved well, on up through life, which is the great secret, the best and only thing, the dynamo that gives energy to everything. Nobody had to tell us to love Tarzan or Prince Valiant. We always knew that Harold Foster was worth all the Johnny-Come-Lately Andy Warhols in the world. We followed no fads or fancies. Our love was constant and true.

So, with this common grist, out of which, to make great yakking talk, our friendship blossomed and grew when our mutual friend Bill Nolan came on the scene. The best friendships are those where everyone talks and yells at once and everyone goes home tired and happy. That's the sort of thing we had, Chuck, Bill, and I. We loved movies and loved comics and loved books and music, and each of us could hardly wait for the other to shut up so we could yell out some special love of ours.

Then one night Chuck came to the house with a manuscript in his hand and said, "Read this. Tell me, am I a writer? This is my first short story."

With some trepidation I sat down and read.

When I had finished only 300 words, I looked up at

Chuck and said, "You're a writer." And again, when finishing the story, "You are indeed a writer."

The story was "Miss Gentilbelle."

It is first in this book because it was first in a career.

After that, I read many of the stories you will find here in first-draft form. I rarely had to make any suggestions. Chuck was already a writer born to be good, better-than-good, and excellent.

The only advice I can claim to have given him at the outset was this: write one short story a week every week of your life from now on.

The very wise, when they hear a good idea, are very obedient. Chuck followed through and year after year turned out his story a week. He worked, I remember, part time at United Parcel Service, back in the early fifties, so as to spend the rest of his hours finishing that special short story that must be sent off in the mail every Saturday.

Some writers are one-idea people. Other writers, far rarer, far wilder, are pomegranates. They burst with seed. Chuck has always been a pomegranate writer. You simply never know where his love and high excitement will take him next.

If I may venture a personal observation, Charles Beaumont is the writer he is because there isn't a snobbish bone in his body. He has had wide-flung and highly diversified interests. One hour he may be out in his gowed-up Porsche, burning the dust on the nearest racetrack. The next he may be trying, as he tried for years, to convince movie producers to make films out of the Ian Fleming books. Chuck has always been right in story judgment, in smelling out, choosing, and working with an idea, or expressing an enthusiasm. There is a gyroscope in him that tilts him immediately away from clichés. So he could be anything he chooses to be in this world: A fine story analyst, an excellent screenwriter, an artist, a novelist, or a happy and forceful racing-car driver.

Here, you will find echoes of all the nights we whooped and hollered and shouted our loves, with a few pet peeves thrown in for seasoning. Here are the ideas that collided head-on with Chuck who stood smiling and welcoming

the wondrous accidents that brought man and literary explosions together.

Only once in my life have I ever seen Chuck Beaumont thrown off his pace. I invited good friend Rod Steiger over to visit one night, along with Bill Nolan. Bill arrived, talking. Chuck arrived, talking. I talked. We all talked and guffawed and yelled. Then Rod Steiger arrived. And Rod can outtalk anyone in the world.

After about an hour I looked over at Beaumont and Nolan and saw their faces slowly slipping off onto the floor. They left early. The next day my phone rang. It was Chuck. "About last night . . ." he said.

"Don't tell me," I said. "You hate Rod Steiger."

"How did you guess?"

"Why, Chuck," I said, "he weaves stories, he tells tales, he talks, he shouts, and, all-in-all, is an irresistible fusing of Bill Nolan and Chuck Beaumont! No wonder you can't stand him!"

"There was so much I had to say," said Chuck. "I had this idea about . . ."

Well, enough. I have stood between Charles Beaumont and you for quite a few hundred words now. There is much he wants to say. He has these ideas.

Speak, Chuck. Even Mr. Steiger, entranced, is listening.

RAY BRADBURY

Los Angeles

April 20th, 1965

Miss Gentilbelle

ROBERT SETTLED ON HIS FAVORITE BRANCH OF THE OLD elm and watched Miss Gentilbelle. The night was very black, but he was not afraid, although he was young enough to be afraid. And he was old enough to hate, but he didn't hate. He merely watched.

Miss Gentilbelle sat straight and stiff in the faded chair by the window. The phonograph had been turned down and she sat, listening. In her hands were a teacup, faintly flowered, and a saucer that did not match. She held them with great care and delicacy and the tea had long ago turned cold.

Robert decided to watch Miss Gentilbelle's hands.

They were thin and delicate, like the cup and saucer. But he saw that they were also wrinkled and not smooth like his own. One of the fingers was encircled by a tarnished yellow band and the skin was very, very white.

Now the phonograph began to repeat toward the end of the record and Miss Gentilbelle let it go for a while before she moved.

When she rose, Robert became frightened and cried loudly. He had forgotten how to climb down from the tree. Miss Gentilbelle heard him crying and after she had replaced the record in its album she went to the window and raised it halfway to the top.

"Roberta," she said, "I'm surprised. Quite surprised." She paused. "Trees are for monkeys and birds, not little girls. Do you remember when I told you that?"

The soft bayou wind took Miss Gentilbelle's words and carried them off. But Robert knew what had been said.

"Yes, Mother. Trees are for monkeys and birds."

"Very well. Come down from there. I wish to speak with you."

"Yes, Mother." Robert remembered. Cautiously at first, and then with greater daring, he grasped small limbs

with his hands and descended to the ground. Before the last jump a jagged piece of bark caught on his gown and ripped a long hole in the gauzy cloth.

The jump hurt his feet but he ran up the splintery steps fast because he had recognized the look in Miss Gentilbelle's eyes. When he got to the living room, he tried nervously to hold the torn patch of cloth together.

He knocked.

"Come in, Roberta." The pale woman beckoned, gestured. "Sit over there, please, in the big chair." Her eyes were expressionless, without color, like clots of mucus. She folded her hands. "I see that you have ruined your best gown," she whispered. "A pity: it once belonged to your grandmother. You should have been in bed, asleep, but instead you were climbing trees and that is why you ruined your gown. It's made of silk—did you know that, Roberta? Pure silk. Soft and fragile, like the wings of a dove; not of the coarse burlap they're using nowadays. Such a pity. . . . It can never be replaced." She was quiet for a time; then she leaned forward. "Tell me, Roberta—what did you promise when I gave you the gown?"

Robert hesitated. There were no words to come. He stared at the frayed Oriental rug and listened to his heart.

"Roberta, don't you think you ought to answer me? What did you promise?"

"That—" Robert's voice was mechanical. "That I would take good care of it."

"And have you taken good care of it?"

"No, Mother, I . . . haven't."

"Indeed you have not. You have been a wicked girl."

Robert bit flesh away from the inside of his mouth. "Can't it be mended?" he asked.

Miss Gentilbelle put a finely woven handkerchief to her mouth and gasped. "Mended! Shall I take it to a tailor and have him sew a patch?" Her eyes came to life, flashing. "When a butterfly has lost its wings, what happens?"

"It can't fly."

"True. It cannot fly. It is dead, it is no longer a butterfly. Roberta—there are few things that can ever be mended. None of the really worthwhile things can be." She sat thoughtfully silent for several minutes, sipping her cold tea.

Robert waited. His bladder began to ache.

"You have been an exceedingly wicked girl, Roberta, and you must be punished. Do you know how I shall punish you?"

Robert looked up and saw his mother's face. "Shall you beat me?"

"Beat you? Really, do I seem so crude? When have I ever beaten you? No. What are a few little bruises? They disappear and are forgotten. You must be taught a lesson. You must be taught never to play tricks again."

The hot night air went through the great house and into his body, but when Miss Gentilbelle took his hand in hers, he felt cold. Her fingers seemed suddenly to be made of iron. They hurt his hand.

Then, in silence, the two walked from the living room, down the vast dark hall, past the many dirty doorways and, finally, into the kitchen.

"Now, Roberta," Miss Gentilbelle said, "run up to your room and bring Margaret to me. Instantly."

He had stopped crying: now he felt ill. Robert knew what his mother was going to do.

He reached up and clutched her arm. "But—"

"I shall count up to thirty-five."

Robert ran out of the room and up the stairs, counting quickly to himself. When he entered his bedroom he went to the small cage and took it from the high shelf. He shook it. The parakeet inside fluttered white and green wings, moved its head in tiny machine movements.

Twenty seconds had passed.

Robert inserted his finger through the slender bars, touched the parakeet's hard bill. "I'm sorry, Margaret," he said. "I'm sorry." He put his face up close to the cage and allowed the bird to nip gently at his nose.

Then he shook the confusion from his head, and ran back downstairs.

Miss Gentilbelle was waiting. In her right hand was a large butcher knife. "Give Margaret to me," she said.

Robert gave the cage to his mother.

"Why do you force me to do these things, child?" asked Miss Gentilbelle.

She took the parakeet from its cage and watched the bird struggle.

Robert's heart beat very fast and he couldn't move; but, he did not hate, yet.

Miss Gentilbelle held the parakeet in her left hand so that one wing was free. The only sound was the frantic fluttering of this wing.

She put the blade of the knife up close to the joint of the wing.

Robert tried not to look. He managed to stare away from Margaret's eyes; his gaze held on his mother's hands.

She held the knife stationary, frozen, touching the feathers.

Why didn't she do it! Get it over with! It was like the time she had killed Edna, holding the knife above the puppy's belly until—

"And now, when you wish you had your little friend, perhaps you will think twice before you climb trees."

There was a quick movement, a glint of silver, an unearthly series of small sounds.

The wing fluttered to the floor.

"Margaret!"

The parakeet screamed for a considerable time before Miss Gentilbelle pressed the life from it. When it was silent, at last, the white fingers that clutched it were stained with a dark, thin fluid.

Miss Gentilbelle put down the butcher knife, and took Robert's hand.

"Here is Margaret," she said. "Take her. Yes. Now: Shall we mend Margaret?"

Robert did not answer.

"Shall we put her together again, glue back her pretty little wing?"

"No, Mother. Nothing can be mended."

"Very good. Perhaps you will learn." Miss Gentilbelle smiled. "Now take the bird and throw it into the stove."

Robert held the dead parakeet gently in his hands, and secretly stroked its back. Then he dropped it into the ashes.

"Take off your gown and put it in, also."

As Robert drew off the thin blue nightgown, he looked directly into his mother's eyes.

"Something you would like to say to me, Roberta?"

"No, Mother."

"Excellent. Put in some papers and light them. And when you've finished that, get a rag from the broom closet and wipe the floor. Then put the rag into the stove."

"Yes, Mother."

"Roberta."

"Yes?"

"Do you understand why Margaret was killed?"

This time he wanted to say no, he did not understand. Not at all. There was such confusion in his head.

"Yes, Mother. I understand."

"And will you climb trees any more when you ought to be in bed?"

"No. I won't climb any more trees."

"I think that is true. Good night, Roberta. You may go to your room, afterwards."

"Good night, Mother."

Miss Gentilbelle walked to the sink and carefully washed her hands. She then returned to the living room and put a record on the phonograph.

When Robert went upstairs, she smiled at him.

He lay still in the bed. The swamp wind was slamming shutters and creaking boards throughout the house, so he could not sleep. From a broken slat in his own shutter, moonlight shredded in upon the room, making of everything dark shadows.

He watched the moonlight and thought about the things he was beginning to know.

They frightened him. The books— The pictures of the people who looked like him and were called boys, and who looked like Miss Gentilbelle and were called girls, or ladies, or women. . . .

He rose from the bed, put his bathrobe about him, and walked to the door. It opened noiselessly, and when it did, he saw that the entire hallway was streaming with dark, cold light. The old Indian's head on the wall looked down at him with a plaster frown, and he could make out most of the stained photographs and wrinkled paintings.

It was so quiet, so quiet that he could hear the frogs and the crickets outside; and the moths, bumping and thrashing against the walls, the windows.

Softly he tiptoed down the long hall to the last doorway

and then back again to his room. Perspiration began to form under his arms and between his legs, and he lay down once more.

But sleep would not come. Only the books, the knowledge, the confusion. Dancing. Burning.

Finally, his heart jabbing, loud, Robert rose and silently retraced his footsteps to the door.

He rapped, softly, and waited.

There was no answer.

He rapped again, somewhat harder than before; but only once.

He cupped his hands to his mouth and whispered into the keyhole: "*Drake!*"

Silence. He touched the doorknob. It turned.

He went into the room.

A large man was lying across a bulky, posterless bed. Robert could hear the heavy guttural breathing, and it made him feel good.

"Drake. Please wake up."

Robert continued to whisper. The large man moved, jerked, turned around. "Minnie?"

"No, Drake. It's me."

The man sat upright, shook his head violently, and pulled open a shutter. The room lit up.

"Do you know what will happen if she finds you here?"

Robert sat down on the bed, close to the man. "I couldn't sleep. I wanted to talk to you. She won't hear—"

"You shouldn't be here. You know what she'll say."

"Just a little while. Won't you talk a little while with me, like you used to?"

The man took a bottle from beneath the bed, filled a glass, drank half. "Look here," he said. "Your mother doesn't like us to be talking together. Don't you remember what she did last time? You wouldn't want that to happen again, would you?"

Robert smiled. "It won't. I don't have anything left for her to kill. She could only hit me now and she wouldn't hit you. She never hits you."

The man smiled, strangely.

"Drake."

"What?"

"Why doesn't she want me to talk to you?"

The man coughed. "It's a long story. Say I'm the gardener and she's the mistress of the house and you're her . . . daughter, and it isn't right that we should mix."

"But why?"

"Never mind."

"Tell me."

"Go back to bed, Bobbie. I'll see next week when your mother takes her trip into town."

"No, Drake, please talk a little more with me. Tell me about town; please tell me about town."

"You'll see some day—"

"Why do you always call me 'Bobbie'? Mother calls me Roberta. Is my name Bobbie?"

The man shrugged. "No. Your name is Roberta."

"Then why do you call me Bobbie? Mother says there is no such name."

The man said nothing, and his hand trembled more.

"Drake."

"Yes?"

"Drake, am I *really* a little girl?"

The man got up and walked over to the window. He opened the other shutter and stood for a long while staring into the night. When he turned around, Robert saw that his face was wet.

"Bobbie, what do you know about God?"

"Not very much. It is mentioned in the George Bernard Shaw book I am reading, but I don't understand."

"Well, God is who must help your mother now, Bobbie boy!"

Robert's fists tightened. He knew—he'd known it for a long time. A *boy* . . .

The man had fallen onto the bed. His hand reached for the bottle, but it was empty.

"It's good," the man said. "Ask your questions. But don't ask them of me. Go away now. Go back to your room!"

Robert wondered if his friend were ill, but he felt too strange to be with anyone. He opened the door and hurried back to his room.

And as he lay down, his brain hurt with the new thoughts. He had learned many wonderful things this night. He could almost identify the feeling that gnawed at

the pit of his stomach whenever he thought of Miss Gentilbelle. . . .

Robert did not sleep before the first signs of dawn appeared. And then he dreamed of dead puppies and dead birds.

They were whispering something to him.

"Why, Roberta," said Miss Gentilbelle, in a soft, shocked voice. "You haven't worn your scent this morning. Did you forget it?"

"Yes."

"A pity. There's nothing like the essence of blossoms to put a touch of freshness about everything."

"I'm sorry."

"I should be displeased if you were to forget your scent again. It's not ladylike to go about smelling of your flesh."

"Yes, Mother."

Miss Gentilbelle munched her toast slowly and looked into Robert's flushed face.

"Roberta, do you feel quite well?"

"Yes."

Miss Gentilbelle put her hand to Robert's forehead. "You do seem somewhat feverish. I think we will dispense with today's lesson in Jeanne d'Arc. Immediately following your criticism on the Buxtehude you will go to bed."

The breakfast was finished in silence as Miss Gentilbelle read a book. Then they went into the living room.

Robert hated the music. It sounded in the faded room like the crunch of shoes on gravel, and the bass notes were all dissolved into an ugly roar.

They listened for one hour without speaking, and Robert moved only to change the records.

"Now, then, Roberta," Miss Gentilbelle said. "Would you agree with Mr. Locke that Buxtehude in these works surpasses the bulk of Bach's organ music?"

Robert shook his head. He knew he would have to answer. "I think Mr. Locke is right."

And then it struck him that he had actually lied before, many times. But perhaps he never knew before that he disliked music.

"Very good. No need to continue. The facts are self-

evident. Go to your room now and undress. Dinner will be prepared at twelve-thirty."

Robert curtsied and began to walk to the stairway.

"Oh, Roberta."

"Yes, Mother?"

"Did you by any chance see Mr. Franklin last night?"

Robert's throat went dry. It was difficult to hold on to his thoughts. "No, Mother, I did not."

"You know you should never see that evil man, don't you? You must always avoid him, never speak a word to him. You remember when I told you that, don't you?"

"Yes, Mother."

"You disobeyed me once. You would never dream of doing that again, would you, Roberta?"

"No, Mother."

"Very good. Retire to your room and be dressed for dinner by twelve."

Robert went up the stairs slowly, for he could not see them. Tears welled in his eyes and burned them, and he thought he would never reach the top.

When he went into his room he saw Margaret for a moment and then she was gone.

He sat on the bed and proceeded to remove his clothes. They were dainty clothes, thin and worn, demanding of great care. He took them off lightly with a light touch and looked at each garment for a long time.

The patent leather shoes, the pink stockings, the pale yellow dress—he laid them neatly on the sofa and looked at them. Then, when all the clothes had been removed, he went to the mirror and looked into it.

Robert didn't know what he saw and he shook his head. Nothing seemed clear; one moment he felt like shouting and another, like going to sleep. Then he became frightened and leapt into the large easy chair, where he drew his legs and arms about him. He sat whimpering softly, with his eyes open, dreaming.

A little bird flew out of a corner and fluttered its wings at him. Margaret's wing, the one Miss Gentilbelle had cut off, fell from the ceiling into his lap and he held it to his face before it disappeared.

Presently the room was full of birds, all fluttering their

wings and crying, crying to Robert. He cried, too, but softly.

He pulled his arms and legs closer to him and wrenched at the blond curls that fell across his eyes. The birds flew at him and around him and then their wings started to fall off. And as they did, the brown liquid he remembered soaked into all the feathers. Some of it got on Robert and when it did, he cried aloud and shut his eyes.

Then the room seemed empty. There were no birds. Just a puppy. A little dog with its belly laid open, crawling up to Robert in a wake of spilled entrails, looking into his eyes.

Robert fell to the floor and rolled over several times, his body quivering, flecks of saliva streaming from his lips.

"Edna, Edna, don't go away."

The puppy tried to walk further but could not. Its round low body twitched like Robert's, and it made snuffling noises.

Robert crawled to a corner.

"Edna, please. It wasn't me, it wasn't, really . . ."

And then a cloud of blackness covered Robert's mind, and he dropped his head on his breast.

When awakened he was in bed and Drake was standing over him, shaking his shoulders.

"Bobbie, what is it?"

"I don't know. All of a sudden I saw Margaret and Edna and all the birds. They were mad, Drake. They were mad!"

The man stroked Robert's forehead gently.

"It's all right. You don't have to be afraid now. You just had a bad nightmare, that's all. I found you laying on the floor."

"It seemed very real this time."

"I know. They sometimes do. Why, I could hear you crying all the way down the hall!"

"She didn't hear me, did she?"

"No, she didn't hear you."

Then Robert saw the heavy brown bag. "Drake, why have you got that suitcase?"

The man coughed and tried to kick the bag underneath the bed. "It's nothing. Just some equipment for the yard."

"No, no it isn't, Drake. I can tell. You're going away!"

"It's equipment for the yard, I tell you."

"Please don't go away, Drake. Please don't. Please don't."

The man tightened his fists and coughed again.

"Now you look, Bobbie. I've just got to go away for a little trip, and I'll be back before you know it. And maybe then we can go off somewhere together. I'm going to find out about it, but you mustn't say a word to your mother. Hear?"

Robert looked up, confused. Something fluttered. He could see it, from the corner of his eye.

The man was dirty and he smelled of alcohol, but it made Robert feel good when he touched him.

"Really? You mean *us*?"

"Bobbie. You've got to tell me something first. Do you love your mother?"

He didn't have to think about it. "No, she always kills things, and always hurts things. I don't love her."

The man spoke under his breath. "I've wanted to do this for a long time."

Something crawled in a corner. Robert could almost see it. "Drake," he said, "have you ever killed anything?"

Perspiration stood out on the man's forehead. He answered as if he had not heard.

"Only once, Bobbie. Only once did I kill."

"What was it? An animal?"

"No. It was worse, Bobbie. I killed a human spirit—a soul."

"Mother does it all the time!"

"I know. There's been a lot of death in this house. . . . But here now, lad, are you over your nightmare?"

Robert tried not to look up.

"Are we really going away when you get back? Away from Mother and this place, just you and me, Drake? Promise me?"

"Yes, boy. Yes, we are!"

The man took Robert's hand in his and held it hard.

"Now you see here. If she learns of this there'll be a lot of trouble. Something might go wrong. So, whatever you

do, don't you let on to her what's happened. I'll see the authorities and tell them everything and you'll get out of here. And we'll be free, you and me, boy!"

Robert didn't say anything. He was looking at a corner.

"Bobbie, you're not old enough yet to know everything about your mother. She wasn't always like she is now. And I wasn't, either. Something just happened and . . . well, I'll tell you about it later so you'll understand. But right now, I want you to do something. After I leave, you get yourself another little pet, a frog or something. Keep it in this room. She'll know nothing's changed, then. She'll know you haven't been talking to me. Get that frog, Bobbie, and I'll be back so that you can have it always as a friend. Always.

"Goodbye, lad. You'll not be staying with that crazy woman much longer, I promise you."

Robert smiled and watched Drake go toward the door.

"Will you really come back, Drake?"

"Nothing on earth is going to stop me, son. I knew that when I saw you last night; I knew it when you asked me those questions. The first normal things I'd heard for . . . Yes, son, I'll be back for you."

Robert did not understand much. Only about the frog. He would find himself a pet and keep it.

The movement in the corners had stopped, and Robert could think for only a little while before he fell into a sound sleep. So sound a sleep that he did not hear Miss Gentilbelle coming up the stairs and he did not see her face when she stepped into the room.

"Roberta, you're late. You were told to be downstairs promptly at twelve-thirty and instead I find you resting like a lady of great leisure. Get up, girl!"

Robert's eyes opened and he wanted to scream.

Then he apologized, remembering to mention nothing of Drake. He put on his dress quickly and went downstairs after Miss Gentilbelle.

He scarcely knew what he was eating; the food was tasteless in his mouth. But he remembered things and answered questions as he always had before.

During dessert Miss Gentilbelle folded her book and laid it aside.

"Mr. Franklin has gone away. Did you know that?"

"No, Mother, I did not. Where has he gone?"

"Not very far—he will be back. He's sure to come back; he always does. Roberta, did Mr. Franklin say anything to you before he left?"

"No, Mother, he did not. I didn't know Mr. Franklin had gone away."

Robert looked at Miss Gentilbelle's hands, watched the way the thin fingers curled about themselves, how they arched delicately in the air.

He looked at the yellow band and again at the fingers. Such white fingers, such dry, white fingers. . . .

"Mother."

"Yes?"

"May I go into the yard for a little while?"

"Yes. You have been naughty and kept me waiting dinner but I shall not punish you. See you remember the kindness and be in the living room in one half hour. You have your criticism to write."

"Yes, Mother."

Robert walked down the steps and into the yard. A soft breeze went through his hair and lifted the golden curls and billowed out his dress. The sun shone hotly but he did not notice. He walked to the first clump of trees and sat carefully on the grass. He waited.

And then, after a time, a plump frog hopped into the clearing and Robert quickly cupped his hands over it. The frog leapt about violently, bumping its body against Robert's palms, and then it was still.

Robert loosened the thin cloth belt around his waist and put the frog under his dress, so that it did not protrude noticeably.

Then he stroked its back from outside the dress. The frog did not squirm or resist.

Robert thought a while.

"I shall call you Drake," he said.

When Robert re-entered the kitchen he saw that Miss Gentilbelle was still reading. He excused himself and went up to his bedroom, softly, so that he would not be heard, and hid the frog in his dresser.

He began to feel odd then. Saliva was forming inside his mouth, boiling hot.

The corners of the room looked alive.
He went downstairs.

"... and Jeanne d'Arc was burned at the stake, her body consumed by flames. And there was only the sound of the flames, and of crackling straw and wood: she did not cry out once." Miss Gentilbelle sighed. "There was punishment for you, Roberta. Do you profit from her story?"

Robert said yes, he had profited.

"So it is with life. The Maid of Orleans was innocent of any crime; she was filled with the greatest virtue and goodness, yet they murdered her. Her own people turned upon her and burnt the flesh away from her bones! Roberta—this is my question. What would *you* have done if you'd been Jeanne d'Arc and could have lived beyond the stake?"

"I—don't know."

"That," said Miss Gentilbelle, "is your misfortune. I must speak with you now. I've purposely put off this discussion so that you might think. But you've thought and remain bathed in your own iniquity. Child, did you honestly suspect that you could go babbling about the house with that drunken fool without my knowledge?"

Robert's heart froze; the hurting needles came.

"I listened to you, and heard a great deal of what was said. First, let us have an answer to a question. Do you think that you are a boy?"

Robert did not answer.

"You do." Miss Gentilbelle moved close. "Well, as it happens, you are not. Not in any sense of the word. For men are animals—do you understand? Tell me, are you an animal or a human being, Roberta?"

"A human being."

"Exactly! Then obviously you cannot be a boy, isn't that so? You are a girl, a young lady: never, never forget that. Do you hear?"

"Yes, Mother."

"That, however, is not the purpose of this discussion." Miss Gentilbelle calmed swiftly. "I am not disturbed that your mind plays tricks on you. No. What does disturb me

is that you should lie and cheat so blatantly to your mother. You see, I heard your talking."

Robert's head throbbed uncontrollably. His temples seemed about to burst with pain.

"So—he has gone to get authorities to take you away from me! Because your mother is so cruel to you, so viciously cruel to the innocent young child! And you will both ride off on a white horse to wonderful lands where no one is mean. . . ." Her cheeks trembled. Her eyes seemed glazed. "Roberta, can you be so naïve? Mr. Franklin is *accustomed* to such promises: I know." She put a hand to her brow, moved thin fingers across the flesh. "At this moment," she said, distantly, "he is in a bar, drinking himself into a stupor. Or perhaps one of the Negro brothels—I understand he's a well-known figure there."

Miss Gentilbelle did not smile. Robert was confused: this was unlike her. He could catch just a little something in her eyes.

"And so you listened to him and loved him and you wait for him. I understand, Roberta; I understand very well indeed. You love the gardener and you will go away with him!" Something happened; her tone changed, abruptly. It was no longer soft and distant. "You must be punished. It ought to be enough when you finally realize that your Drake will never come back to carry you off. But—it is not enough. There must be more."

Robert heard very little now.

"Stop gazing off as if you didn't hear me. Now—bring your little friend here."

Robert felt the seed growing within him. He could feel it hard and growing inside his heart. And he couldn't think now.

Miss Gentilbelle took Robert's wrist in her hand and clutched it until her nails bit deep into the flesh. "I saw you put that animal in your dress and take it upstairs. Fetch it to me this instant."

Robert looked into his mother's eyes. Miss Gentilbelle stood above him, her hands clasped now to the frayed white collars of her dress. She was trembling and her words did not quite knit together.

"Get it, bring it to me, to me. Do you hear?"

Robert nodded dumbly, and went upstairs to his room. It was alive. Birds filled it, and puppies. Little puppies, crying, whimpering with pain.

He walked straight to the dresser and withdrew the frog, holding it securely in his hand.

Green and white wings brushed his face as he went back toward the door.

He walked downstairs and into the living room. Miss Gentilbelle was standing in the doorway; her eyes danced over the wriggling animal.

Robert said nothing as they walked into the kitchen.

"I am sure, Roberta, that when you see this—and when you see that no one ever comes to take you away—that the best thing is merely to be a good girl. It is enough. To be a good girl and do as Mother says."

She took the frog and held it tightly. She did not seem to notice that Robert's mouth was moist, that his eyes stared directly through her.

She did not seem to hear the birds and the puppies whispering to Robert, or see them clustering about him.

She held the frog in one hand, and with the other pulled a large knife from the knife-holder. It was rusted and without luster, but its edge was keen enough, and its point sharp.

"You must think about this, child. About how you forced your mother into punishing you." She smiled. "Tell me this: have you named your little friend?"

"Yes. His name is Drake."

"Drake! How very appropriate!"

Miss Gentilbelle did not look at her son. She put the frog on the table and turned it over on its back. The creature thrashed violently.

Then she put the point of the knife on the frog's belly, paused, waited, and pushed inwards. The frog twitched as she held it and drew the blade slowly across, slowly, deep inside the animal.

In a while, when it had quieted, she dropped the frog into a box of kindling.

She did not see Robert pick up the knife and hold it in his hand.

Robert had stopped thinking. Snowy flecks of saliva dotted his face, and his eyes had no life to them. He

listened to his friends. The puppies, crawling about his feet, yipping painfully. The birds, dropping their bloody wings, flying crazily about his head, screaming, calling. And now the frogs, hopping, croaking. . . .

He did not think. He listened.

"Yes . . . yes."

Miss Gentilbelle turned quickly and her laughter died as she did so. She threw her hands out and cried—but the knife was already sliding through her pale dress, and through her pale flesh.

The birds screeched and the puppies howled and the frogs croaked. Yes, yes, yes, yes!

And the knife came out and went in again, it came out and went in again.

Then Robert slipped on the wet floor and fell. He rolled over and over, crying softly, and laughing, and making other sounds.

Miss Gentilbelle said nothing. Her thin white fingers were curled about the handle of the butcher knife, but she no longer tried to pull it from her stomach.

Presently her wracked breathing stopped.

Robert rolled into a corner, and drew his legs and arms about him, tight.

He held the dead frog to his face and whispered to it. . . .

The large red-faced man walked heavily through the cypressed land. He skillfully avoided bushes and pits and came, finally, to the clearing that was the entrance to the great house.

He walked to the wrought-iron gate that joined to the high brick wall that was topped with broken glass and curved spikes.

He opened the gate, crossed the yard, and went up the decaying, splintered steps.

He applied a key to the old oak door.

"Minnie!" he called. "Got a little news for you! Hey, Minnie!"

The silent stairs answered him.

He went into the living room, upstairs to Robert's room.

"Minnie!"

He walked back to the hallway. An uncertain grin covered his face. "They're not going to let you keep him! How's that? How do you like it?"

The warm bayou wind sighed through the shutters.

The man made fists with his fingers, paused, walked down the hall, and opened the kitchen door.

The sickly odor went to his nostrils first. The words "Jesus God" formed on his lips, but he made no sound.

He stood very still, for a long time.

The blood on Miss Gentilbelle's face had dried, but on her hands and where it had gathered on the floor, it was still moist.

Her fingers were stiff around the knife.

The man's eyes traveled to the far corner. Robert was huddled there, chanting softly—flat, dead, singsong words.

". . . wicked . . . must be punished . . . wicked girl . . ."

Robert threw his head back and smiled up at the ceiling.

The man walked to the corner and lifted Robert to his chest and held him tightly, crushingly.

"Bobbie," he said. "Bobbie. Bobbie. Bobbie."

The warm night wind turned cold.

It sang through the halls and through the rooms of the great house in the forest.

And then it left, frightened and alone.

The Last Caper

"SO YOU'RE MIKE MALLET," I SAID, FEEDING HIM SOME knuckles. He went down—fast—and began to whimper. When he came back up I got my knee under his chin and teeth flew out like the popcorn they used to pop on those drowsy October porches when I was a kid and Mom and Dad used to say "Ah! Ah!" and we'd drink the lemonade and eat the popcorn and breathe the Illinois air which was like old wine.

"Spill it, Mallet," I snarled, but I guess he thought I meant blood. It wasn't pretty. What is?

I tapped him on the forehead with the chromalloy butt of my blaster, just for kicks, and started through his pockets.

There wasn't much. A ray pistol disguised as a ball point pen, a shiv, a sap, a set of knuckles, a paralyzer, a Monopoly score card, eight candy bars, a bottle of Bromo-Seltzer, a picture of an old dame with a funny look (with *For Mikey, with love, Mommy* scrawled suspiciously underneath in crayon), a paint brush, a ticket to Mars (out-dated), a copy of *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, a can of Sterno and a card marked: HONORARY MEMBER—EAST ORANGE CHAPTER LADIES LEAGUE FOR PRESERVATION OF THE AMERICAN BEAUTY ROSE.

And that was all!

If he had it, if Mallet really did have what I was after—the Chocolate Maltese Falcon—it wasn't on him. I toed at his face and jammed the candy bars into my mouth: they tasted real fine, mostly because I'd had nothing in my stomach except straight rye for over seventeen days. The rest of the junk I tossed out the window.

"Come on, friend," I said, but he just laid there bleeding. It made me a little mad, and I'm kind of ugly when I get mad. I went through the door into his outer office. His secretary was there.

"Next time *open* the door before you come through it, big boy," she spat.

I didn't answer. My eyes were riveted to her body. She was wearing a slinky gold gown that looked like it had been painted on and she was laying on a big leather couch, writhing. I still felt pretty mean, so I moved in—fast.

I've got to admit I was plenty surprised when I found out that the gown really *was* painted on; but it made things easier.

"Get much hot weather around here?" I snapped, my eyes traveling up and down her body like ball-bearings over a washboard.

"Sometimes yes," she said evasively, "sometimes no. It comes and it goes."

"Oh yeah?" She was all right: a little wildcat, and I like wildcats just fine. She threw a vicious kick at my groin but I dodged and grabbed her leg. Then I grabbed her other leg. Then I grabbed her other leg. Oh, she was different, all right. But good!

After I finished with her I jammed her into the typewriter cabinet and let the door slam shut. Dames!

I was feeling a lot better by now, though. Kind of like spring in the air and the first time you carried the books home for that freckle-faced girl next door and goodbye and hello and the dead years of your childhood. I knew I could find that Chocolate Maltese Falcon now, no matter how cleverly Mallet had hidden it.

I stormed back into his office. He was coming to, getting to his knees. This time I used a poker on his head. It cracked. The poker, that is.

I went to work, thinking, it's got to be here, it's *got* to be here! I kicked over the bookcase, took an ax to the desk, piled the chairs into the fireplace, pushed the safe out the window, cut the carpet into Band-Aids, ripped out the light fixtures, flooded the restroom and wrote a couple things on the walls with some charcoal. Mallet was starting to groan a little so I dropped the bathtub on him: he stopped groaning.

Still no Chocolate Maltese Falcon!

The place was getting pretty untidy by now. I de-

cided I'd better ease up or somebody'd figure there'd been trouble.

Just then a movement caught my eye. I jerked around. A tall blonde was walking by the window. I knew she was tall—Mallet's office was on the ninth floor. She looked all February, silos in the rain, clear lakes full of trout. I started after her and was halfway out when there was a knock at the door.

Rat-tat! Rat-tat!

I jumped to answer it but my foot skidded on some blood and I went down for the ten count, hitting my head on one of the Brancusi statuettes Mallet kept around for laughs. Right away an inky black pool came at me: it splashed over my brain and pretty soon it was like lying on your back high on a hill somewhere on a black night where the stars are coruscating and dancing their cosmic rigadon. Before I blacked out completely, though, I felt the butt of a blaster hit the side of my face. Then it was curtains. . . .

The voice cut through the brain-fog like a knife going through butter. There was a million firecrackers going off inside my head. Pow!

Pow! Pow!

"You Gunther Awl?" a voice said.

I spit out a couple teeth. "Yeah," I choked, "I'm Gunther Awl." It was a lie. I wasn't Gunther Awl at all. But I figured I'd better play it safe.

"C'mon, snap out of it," the voice ordered. I got up, slow-like, and staggered to a chair.

"All right," the voice said, "let's have it."

I focused my eyes. It was a fat guy, with curly hair and jowls and a tattoo of Botticelli's *Venus on the Half Shell* on his forehead. A fink. A patsy.

"Anything particular in mind, badman?" I drawled. The gun butt came down again with savage force and I found myself spiraling into that inky black pool again. Only this time it was like being inside a kaleidoscope and the kaleidoscope is turning like the Giant Barrel over at Coney and you're trying to stand up but the Barrel keeps turning too fast and you keep falling down and every time you fall you slide a little closer to the sparkling fragments of color at the top of the kaleidoscope and the bright

white light filters through like it's a big pool with hundreds of jeweled fish with bright white teeth swimming around in it. Then suddenly you're at the top . . . and you come to again.

"Where's the Falcon, Awl?" the fat man said. "And don't get funny this time."

"No spikka da Heenglish," I faked, but it wasn't any good—I could see that. It didn't stop him for more than two minutes, three at the outside.

He hawked convulsively and I thought he was going to heave, then I saw that he was laughing. What at? I wondered. He stopped laughing before I could dope it out.

"Don't push it, rocket-jockey," he said. I could tell he wasn't joking. This monkey was playing for keeps.

"Look," I said, "you got the wrong boy. I ain't Gunther Awl. My name's Bartholomew Cornblossom."

"Yeah," he said, grinning, "I know." He shifted the blaster to his left hand and let me have a backside right across the puss.

When his hand came off and dropped to the floor, I knew *I* was in for some surprises myself.

He started to change form—fast—and in less time than it takes to skin a jackrabbit, like the hick says, I was staring at a lousy Venusian. I hated him right away because I didn't understand him and I always hate what I don't understand. Sometimes I hate what I *do* understand.

I had to stall. "What's your angle, cousin?" I asked. "What good's the Chocolate Maltese Falcon to a Venusian?"

There was that laugh again, coming from one of his ears. I did a quick mental flashback as that green blob of jelly came at me.

How had it all started . . .

I'd been sitting in my office that day playing euchre with 1742-A, my secretary. She was beating me—bad—and that made me plenty sore, because I don't dig getting beat; not by a robot, anyway. 1742-A was a robot. Who can afford real secretaries at fifty credits a caper? Besides, business had kind of slacked off.

Well, I was reaching over to turn her off, when this

redhead walks in like she owned the place, which she didn't: I rented from a Mrs. Murfreesboro over in Jersey—a bigmouth dame that liked me okay.

"Hello, Bart," the redhead said. She had on a fur coat. It was dead—murdered. I told her to sit down and she said thanks I will and sat down. So far it figured.

She got out a flask from her purse and gave it to me before I could say boo. I shot her a look and let the rye trickle down my craw. It was good rye, fine rye.

"What's the caper?" I snapped.

Then she told me about this thing, the Chocolate Maltese Falcon. She said it was a family heirloom that her old man left to her when he kicked off. She said not only was it worth plenty scratch on the open market, but it had great sentimental value to boot. She said she hired Mike Mallet as a guard, and that's when the trouble started. Next morning: no Mallet, no Falcon.

My job: Find Mallet, get the Falcon, bring it back.

"I suppose," she said, pulling out some vitamin capsules, "that you're in business for your health." She did big things with her eyes. I was impressed.

"No," I told her, "I ain't in business for my health."

She pouted a little. "All right," she said then, "how'd you like a nice new C-note, Handsome?"

"I'd like it fine, ma'am," I said.

"And if you're successful," she cooed, "maybe—who knows?—maybe there'll be a little bonus. . . ."

"You mean?" I pulled her onto my lap and grabbed some lip. It was plenty great. It made me think of oceans crashing against lonely rocks and cotton candy and the carnival where the man in the bright vest says "Hurry! Hurry!"

Then she scrambled. Without leaving a deposit.

"Are you going to turn over the Falcon peacefully?" the green snake guy was saying, "or must we resort to measures best described as strong?"

I laughed in his faces. The butt flashed out and I was sinking, sinking into that old inky black pool. . . .

When I woke up, my arms were tied. My legs were tied. I was sitting in a straight-back chair. It wouldn't

have been so bad, maybe—except I was hanging upside down.

"We shall see now how bravely the Earthling struts!" The Venusian slithered over toward the radio. I wondered: What's his pitch? How come he's so interested in a family heirloom?

"You'll never get nothing out of me," I snarled.

The radio hummed into life.

"What the—" I began, lamely.

The Venusian crammed a gag into my mouth. "Listen!" he said.

I listened. . . .

"Monday . . . Monday . . . *Monday!*"

"No, David, please—don't touch me. I came to see you tonight to say . . . goodbye."

"*Goodbye?!?*"

"Yes! For a few blind, crazy—wonderful—hours, you made me forget that I'm over thirty-five, a married woman and mother of six. But now—"

"Now?"

"—Lord Henri is back. He's—brought the children. I—oh David! Don't touch me! Hold me close!

"Monday!"

"David!"

Then I got it. Leave it to a stinking wet-belly Venusian to think up the *real* tortures. A soap-opera!

I listened to the electric organ's moo. Maybe I shouldn't admit it, but I can't stand soap operas. Oh, I know, *One Man's Cosmos* is mainly what's kept the planets from all-out war, but . . . well, they give me a pain in the gut.

I tried to shut my ears, but it was no dice. . . .

" . . . Will Monday be able to make David understand? *How* can she explain to him that she remains loyal to her husband, Lord Henri Winthrop, *not* because she loves him but because he has come back from the Erosian uprising a hopeless paralytic? And what of David? How can he tell Monday that her husband is really dead—murdered—and that his, Lord Henri's, neurotic twin

brother, Hugo Winthrop, is playing the part of the invalid husband? How can David let her know that the portals to their happiness lie open—when Hugo threatens to expose David's lurid past as a privateer and *tsi-tso* frond smuggler for the Martians? . . . and the children! Will the operation actually restore little Tuesday's eyesight? Will Wednesday be able to exorcise the Uranian bandit who has inhabited her body? Will Friday regain her memory in time to stop Nick Branzetti's evil plan? . . . Tune in tomorrow at this time to see what Fate has in store for—OUR GAL MONDAY: *The Real Life Story that Asks the Question: Can a Girl from a Little Lunar Rocketport Find Happiness with Jupiter's Richest, Most Handsome Queek?* . . . And now, a word from—"

"Would you care to tell me the location of the Falcon now, Mr. Cornblossom?" asked the Venusian, removing the gag.

"I don't know where it is," I snapped. "I don't know. I don't know!"

"Very well . . ."

He turned the radio higher. And I thought: My God—it might have been television. . . .

". . . your dishes and thurpets sparkling bright, dazzling white, with the new washday miracle that requires no rinsing, in fact, requires no water: STAR-FLAKES! . . . Just open the cage, let out a few flakes, turn them loose on those greasy pots and torgums and—just watch 'em eat up that grime! PRESTO! The job is finished. Then all you have to do is drop the dead flakes into a handy container and bury them somewhere. Remember! STAR-FLAKES are 99.44 per cent ALIVE! . . ."

"Where is the Falcon?"

"I don't know! I don't know!"

". . . and now stay tuned for the program that follows: The best loved, most respected program in the world: ONE MAN'S COSMOS: *The Story of Just Plain*

Gratch, the Friendly Tendril-Tender of Betelgeuseville—"

"All right, you damned fiend!" I screamed. "All right! I'll tell you!"

"Ah." The Venusian turned the program off just as my mind was beginning to go. He let me down.

"Before I give it to you," I said, "would you mind letting me know why you're so interested? After all, even if the statue's worth money, you don't need—"

"Statue!" The snake guy chortled and choked. "Statue!" I thought he'd break up; then he sobered—fast. "The bird with the whimsical cognomen," he hissed, "happens to contain enough D-plus-4-over-X grains to blow up a planet!"

Well, that was a kick in the pants, all right.

The government had been going ape trying to figure out who'd stolen the secret D-plus-4-over-X grains. Now I had the picture. Redhead. My beautiful employer. A lousy spy. She'd lifted the bomb from the government and then somebody'd lifted it from her.

Real sweet. Where did it leave me, Bart Cornblossom, Private Orb? At the short end of the stick, that's where.

"The planet I refer to," the Venusian was saying, "is, needless to remark, your own."

"Not," somebody said, "if I can help it!" It was Mike Mallet—groggy, but still plenty tough. He got a half-nelson around the Venusian, grabbed the blaster and in a second Mr. Venusman was out of the story.

"Hiya, Bart—" Mallet said, then he seemed to remember. "You son of a—"

"Drop the gun, Mallet," a voice said. Mallet whirled around in time to catch three good blasts in the belly. I could smell it clear across the room.

"Hello, Baby," I snarled.

"Hello, Bart," she said. "Now be a good boy and play ball. I know you've got the Falcon."

"Come and get it."

She ripped off her clothes and sat in my lap. I started to think of July when I saw that she was wavering, changing. She wasn't no redhead—she was a Martian!

"Mallet was going to turn the Falcon back over to your government," she said, nibbling at my schnoz. "I had to do it. You can see that, can't you?"

"Sure," I said. "I can see that."

"But you're not like that, Bart. You're smart—I can tell. Look—" She twiddled her antennae like a couple castanets "—you've always made a mess out of me inside. Ever since that first kiss. Miscegenation be damned, that kiss was for real! So listen—with the money my government'll pay me for the D-plus-4-over-X grains, we could really live it up."

"Sure, baby," I said, "but I ain't going nowhere all tied up in this chair."

She planted one on my kisser and I felt all May and golden fields of ripe wheat and barefoot in soft river mud. She undid the ropes.

"We've got to hurry, though," she whispered. "The grains explode—or, I should say, implode—every 36 hours: we have just barely enough time to ship them away. But first—oh darling, squirrel, my own Bart—we're going to be so very happy. . . ."

She was beautiful, green hair or no green hair, and I held her body—close—and felt her breathing and thought about her next to me at night and the dough and—

I hated it. It made me sick, deep down where it hurts.

"Darling—"

I let her have it in the gut. She sprawled. I grabbed the blaster and pretty soon there was some jam on the floor instead of a dame.

"I'm sorry, baby," I whispered to the sticky heap, "really sorry . . ."

I don't know—maybe I cried, maybe I laughed. I only know I went crazy mad for a few seconds.

Then I straightened up and thought: so, it's all over. End of the caper. Back to the office and a few straight shots and a couple lousy credits.

But wait. Good gravy, I thought: The Falcon! If she was telling the truth and those D-plus-4-over-X grains really were inside—and getting ready to explode, I mean implode . . .

I could hear them coming. Lots of them. I ran to the

window—big ones, armed, none of them smiling. Venusians, Martians, Jovians—

There was a wild chuckling then. "Heh heh heh!" I took the lunky out of my mug and snapped it away and went through the door.

The chuckling was coming from the typewriter cabinet. I opened it. I should've known better than to be nice to any chick with three legs. They're poison with two—but with three! "What's the gag?" I snarled.

She told me. I couldn't believe it—I made her go through it four times. Then fear started to tear up my stomach muscles.

Mallet had had the Chocolate Maltese Falcon, all right. But he'd been smart. Yeah, smart.

He'd had it melted down into candy bars!

And I'd been hungry, so—

It wasn't easy to take. All the bums in the Galaxy were after the Chocolate Maltese Falcon. Which meant that all the bums in the Galaxy were after me. Because—

Now I was the Chocolate Maltese Falcon!

Sweat niagaraed down my face. The D-plus-4-over-X grains had been missing for—how long? No, no, I thought. Jeez!

I belted the nutty dame a good one on the smeller and listened to her yell until it got boring. Then the door burst open. The big Jovian started to ankle over, hate in his five little pig eyes.

I squeezed the trigger and turned the Jovian into a blood pudding like they used to serve in those English places with names like Seven Oaks and Ukridge.

Then the Venusians came in and I figured the better part of valor was to blow. A couple squeezes of the trigger and I blew.

I got behind Mallet's desk and loosened my tie and pushed my hat back on my head, thinking, this is it, Bart boy, this is it.

They were getting ready. That door would fly open in a second—

All of a sudden I felt something happening inside my gut, a rumbling like you get after a slug of rye. It started to ache—bad—and the second the scum of the universe spilled in, it came up.

Fast.

And then I wasn't Bart Cornblossom any more. I was Christmas and the smell of afternoon turkey and playgrounds where you fall down and scab up your knees and have to run home to Mom and Dad and hello how are you and a piece of the sky just fell Chicken Little and now it's falling falling and how long is eternity Gramp? and Gramp saying it's a right smart piece o' time boy and don't cry son because worse things than blowing up can happen to a man lots worse things and you're floating floating out there with the whole world for a teeter-totter for ever and ever and ever. . . .

The New People

IF ONLY HE HAD TOLD HER RIGHT AT THE BEGINNING that he didn't like the house, everything would have been fine. He could have manufactured some plausible story about bad plumbing or poor construction—something; anything!—and she'd have gone along with him. Not without a fight, maybe: he could remember the way her face had looked when they stopped the car. But he could have talked her out of it. Now, of course, it was too late.

For what? he wondered, trying not to think of the party and all the noise that it would mean. Too late for what? It's a good house, well built, well kept up, roomy. Except for that blood stain, cheerful. Anyone in his right mind . . .

"Dear, aren't you going to shave?"

He lowered the newspaper gently and said, "Sure." But Ann was looking at him in that hurt, accusing way, and he knew that it was hopeless.

Hank-what's-wrong, he thought, starting toward the bathroom.

"Hank," she said.

He stopped but did not turn. "Uh-huh?"

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he said.

"Honey. Please."

He faced her. The pink chiffon dress clung to her body, which had the firmness of youth; her face was unblemished, the lipstick and powder incredibly perfect; her hair, cut long, was soft on her white shoulders: in seven years Ann hadn't changed.

Resentfully, Prentice glanced away. And was ashamed. You'd think that in this time I'd get accustomed to it, he thought. *She is*. Damn it!

"Tell me," Ann said.

"Tell you what? Everything is okay," he said.

She came to him and he could smell the perfume, he could see the tiny freckles that dotted her chest. He wondered what it would be like to sleep with her. Probably it would be very nice.

"It's about Davey, isn't it?" she said, dropping her voice to a whisper. They were standing only a few feet from their son's room.

"No," Prentice said; but, it was true—Davey was part of it. For a week now Prentice had ridden on the hope that getting the locomotive repaired would change things. A kid without a train, he'd told himself, is bound to act peculiar. But he'd had the locomotive repaired and brought it home and Davey hadn't even bothered to set up the track.

"He appreciated it, dear," Ann said. "Didn't he thank you?"

"Sure, he thanked me."

"Well?" she said. "Honey, I've *told* you: Davey is going through a period, that's all. Children do. Really."

"I know."

"And school's been out for almost a month."

"I know," Prentice said, and thought: *Moving to a neighborhood where there isn't another kid in the whole damn block for him to play with, that might have something to do with it, too!*

"Then," Ann said, "it's me."

"No, no, no." He tried a smile. There wasn't any sense in arguing: they'd been through it a dozen times, and she had an answer for everything. He could recall the finality in her voice . . . "I love the house, Hank. And I love the neighborhood. It's what I've dreamed of all my life, and I think I deserve it. Don't you?" (It was the first time she'd ever consciously reminded him.) "The trouble is, you've lived in dingy little apartments so long you've come to *like* them. You can't adjust to a really *decent* place—and Davey's no different. You're two of a kind: little old men who can't stand a change, even for the better! Well, I can. I don't care if *fifty* people committed suicide here, I'm happy. You understand, Hank? Happy."

Prentice had understood, and had resolved to make a real effort to like the new place. If he couldn't do that,

at least he could keep his feelings from Ann—for they were, he knew, foolish. Damned foolish. Everything she said was true, and he ought to be grateful.

Yet, somehow, he could not stop dreaming of the old man who had picked up a razor one night and cut his throat wide open . . .

Ann was staring at him.

"Maybe," he said, "I'm going through a period, too." He kissed her forehead, lightly. "Come on, now; the people are going to arrive any second, and you look like Lady Macbeth."

She held his arm for a moment. "You are getting settled in the house, aren't you?" she said. "I mean, it's becoming more like home to you, isn't it?"

"Sure," Prentice said.

His wife paused another moment, then smiled. "Okay, get the whiskers off. Rhoda is under the impression you're a handsome man."

He walked into the bathroom and plugged in the electric shaver. Rhoda, he thought. First names already and we haven't been here three weeks.

"Dad?"

He looked down at Davey, who had slipped in with nine-year-old stealth. "Yo." According to ritual, he ran the shaver across his son's chin.

Davey did not respond. He stepped back and said, "Dad, is Mr. Ames coming over tonight?"

Prentice nodded. "I guess so."

"And Mr. Chambers?"

"Uh-huh. Why?"

Davey did not answer.

"What do you want to know for?"

"Gee." Davey's eyes were red and wide. "Is it okay if I stay in my room?"

"Why? You sick?"

"No. Kind of."

"Stomach? Head?"

"Just sick," Davey said. He pulled at a thread in his shirt and fell silent again.

Prentice frowned. "I thought maybe you'd like to show them your train," he said.

"Please," Davey said. His voice had risen slightly and

Prentice could see tears gathering. "Dad, please don't make me come out. Leave me stay in my room. I won't make any noise, I promise, and I'll go to sleep on time."

"Okay, okay. Don't make such a big deal out of it!" Prentice ran the cool metal over his face. Anger came and went, swiftly. Stupid to get mad. "Davey, what'd you do, ride your bike on their lawn or something? Break a window?"

"No."

"Then why don't you want to see them?"

"I just don't."

"Mr. Ames likes you. He told me so yesterday. He thinks you're a fine boy, so does Mr. Chambers. They—"

"Please, Dad!" Davey's face was pale; he began to cry. "Please, please, please. Don't let them get me!"

"What are you talking about? Davey, cut it out. Now!"

"I saw what they were doing there in the garage. And they know I saw them, too. They know. And—"

"Davey!" Ann's voice was sharp and loud and re-sounding in the tile-lined bathroom. The boy stopped crying immediately. He looked up, hesitated, then ran out. His door slammed.

Prentice took a step.

"No, Hank. Leave him alone."

"He's upset."

"Let him be upset." She shot an angry glance toward the bedroom. "I suppose he told you that filthy story about the garage?"

"No," Prentice said, "he didn't. What's it all about?"

"Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Honestly, I'd like to meet Davey's parents!"

"We're his parents," Prentice said, firmly.

"All right, all right. But he got that imagination of his from *somebody*, and it wasn't from us. You're going to have to speak to him, Hank. I mean it. Really."

"About what?"

"These wild stories. What if they got back to Mr. Ames? I'd—well, I'd die. After he's gone out of his way to be nice to Davey, too."

"I haven't heard the stories," Prentice said.

"Oh, you will." Ann undid her apron and folded it, furiously. "Honestly! Sometimes I think the two of you

are trying to make things just as miserable as they can be for me."

The doorbell rang, stridently.

"Now make an effort to be pleasant, will you? This is a *housewarming*, after all. And do hurry."

She closed the door. He heard her call, "Hi!" and heard Ben Roth's baritone booming: "Hi!"

Ridiculous, he told himself, plugging the razor in again. Utterly goddam ridiculous. No one complained louder than I did when we were tripping over ourselves in that little upstairs coffin on Friar. *I'm* the one who kept moaning for a house, not Ann.

So now we've got one.

He glanced at the tiny brownish blood stain that wouldn't wash out of the wallpaper, and sighed.

Now we've got one.

"Hank!"

"Coming!" He straightened his tie and went into the living room.

The Roths, of course, were there. Ben and Rhoda. Get it right, he thought, because we're all going to be pals. "Hi, Ben."

"Thought you'd deserted us, boy," said the large, pink man, laughing.

"No. Wouldn't do that."

"Hank," Ann signaled. "You've met Beth Cummings, haven't you?"

The tall, smartly dressed woman giggled and extended her hand. "We've seen each other," she said. "Hello."

Her husband, a pale man with white hair, crushed Prentice's fingers. "Fun and games," he said, tightening his grip and wheezing with amusement. "Yes, sir."

Trying not to wince, Prentice retrieved his hand. It was instantly snatched up by a square, bald man in a double-breasted brown suit. "Reiker," the man said. "Call me Bud. Everyone does. Don't know why; my name is Oscar."

"*That's* why," a woman said, stepping up. "Ann introduced us but you probably don't remember, if I know men. I'm Edna."

"Sure," Prentice said. "How are you?"

"Fine. But then, I'm a woman: I *like* parties!"

"How's that?"

"Hank!"

Prentice excused himself and walked quickly into the kitchen. Ann was holding up a package.

"Honey, look what Rhoda gave us!"

He dutifully handled the salt and pepper shakers and set them down again. "That's real nice."

"You turn the rooster's head," Mrs. Roth said, "and it grinds your pepper."

"Wonderful," Prentice said.

"And Beth gave us this lovely salad bowl, see? And we've needed *this* for *centuries*!" She held out a gray tablecloth with gold bordering. "Plastic!"

"Wonderful," Prentice said. Again, the doorbell rang. He glanced at Mrs. Roth, who had been staring thoughtfully at him, and returned to the living room.

"How you be, Hank?" Lucian Ames walked in, rubbing his hands together briskly. "Well! The gang's all here, I see. But where's that boy of yours?"

"Davey? Oh," Prentice said, "he's sick."

"Nonsense! Boys that age are never sick. Never!"

Ann laughed nervously from the kitchen. "Just something he ate!"

"Not the candy we sent over, I hope."

"Oh, no."

"Well, tell him his Uncle Lucian said hello."

A tan elf of a man, with sparkling eyes and an ill fitting mustache, Ames reminded Prentice somewhat of those clerks who used to sit silently on high wooden stools, posting infinitesimal figures in immense yellow ledgers. He was, however, the head of a nationally famous advertising agency.

His wife Charlotte provided a remarkable contrast. She seemed to belong to the era of the twenties, with her porcelain face, her thin, delicately angular body, her air of fragility.

Nice, Prentice told himself.

He removed coats and hung them in closets. He shook hands and smiled until his face began to ache. He looked at presents and thanked the women and told them they shouldn't have. He carried out sandwiches. He mixed drinks.

By eight-thirty, everyone in the block had arrived. The Johnsons, the Ames, the Roths, the Reikers, the Klementaskis, the Chamberses; four or five others whose names Prentice could not remember, although Ann had taken care to introduce them.

What it is, he decided, looking at the people, at the gifts they had brought, remembering their many kindnesses and how, already, Ann had made more friends than she'd ever had before, is, I'm just an antisocial bastard.

After the third round of whiskeys and martinis, someone turned on the FM and someone else suggested dancing. Prentice had always supposed that one danced only at New Year's Eve parties, but he said the hell with it, finally, and tried to relax.

"Shall we?" Mrs. Ames said.

He wanted to say no, but Ann was watching. So he said, "Sure, if you've got strong toes," instead.

Almost at once he began to perspire. The smoke, the drinks, the heat of the crowded room, caused his head to ache; and, as usual, he was acutely embarrassed at having to hold a strange woman so closely.

But, he continued to smile.

Mrs. Ames danced well, she followed him with unerring instinct; and within moments she was babbling freely into his ear. She told him about old Mr. Thomas, the man who had lived here before, and how surprised everyone had been at what had happened; she told him how curious they'd all been about The New People and how relieved they were to find him and Ann so very nice; she told him he had strong arms. Ann was being twirled about by Herb Johnson. She was smiling.

An endless, slow three-step came on, then, and Mrs. Ames put her cheek next to Prentice's. In the midst of a rambling sentence, she said, suddenly, in a whisper: "You know, I think it was awfully brave of you to adopt little Davey. I mean, considering."

"Considering what?"

She pulled away and looked at him. "Nothing," she said. "I'm awfully sorry."

Blushing with fury, Prentice turned and strode into the kitchen. He fought his anger, thinking, God, God, is she telling strangers about it now? Is it a topic for back-

fence gossip? *"My husband is impotent, you know. Is yours?"*

He poured whiskey into a glass and drank it, fast. It made his eyes water, and when he opened them, he saw a figure standing next to him.

It was—who? Dystal. Matthew Dystal; bachelor; movie writer or something; lives down the block. Call him Matt.

"Miserable, isn't it?" the man said, taking the bottle from Prentice's hand.

"What do you mean?"

"Everything," the man said. He filled his glass and drained it smartly. "Them. Out there." He filled the glass again.

"Nice people," Prentice forced himself to say.

"You think so?"

The man was drunk. Clearly, very drunk. And it was only nine-thirty.

"You think so?" he repeated.

"Sure. Don't you?"

"Of course. I'm one of them, aren't I?"

Prentice peered at his guest closely, then moved toward the living room.

Dystal took his arm. "Wait," he said. "Listen. You're a good guy. I don't know you very well, but I like you, Hank Prentice. So I'm going to give you some advice." His voice dropped to a whisper. "Get out of here," he said.

"What?"

"Just what I said. Move away, move away to another city."

Prentice felt a quick ripple of annoyance, checked it. "Why?" he asked, smiling.

"Never mind that," Dystal said. "Just do it. Tonight. Will you?" His face was livid, clammy with perspiration; his eyes were wide.

"Well, I mean, Matt, that's a heck of a thing to say. I thought you said you liked us. Now you want to get rid of us."

"Don't joke," Dystal said. He pointed at the window. "Can't you see the moon? You bloody idiot, can't you—"

"Hey, hey! Unfair!"

At the sound of the voice, Dystal froze. He closed his

eyes for a moment and opened them, slowly. But he did not move.

Lucian Ames walked into the kitchen. "What's the story here," he said, putting his arm on Dystal's shoulder, "you trying to monopolize our host all night?"

Dystal did not answer.

"How about a refill, Hank?" Ames said, removing his hand.

Prentice said, "Sure," and prepared the drink. From the corner of his eye, he saw Dystal turn and walk stiffly out of the room. He heard the front door open and close.

Ames was chuckling. "Poor old Matt," he said. "He'll be hung over tomorrow. It seems kind of a shame, doesn't it? I mean, you know, of all people, you'd think a big Hollywood writer would be able to hold his liquor. But not Matt. He gets loaded just by staring at the labels."

Prentice said, "Huh."

"Was he giving you one of his screwball nightmares?"

"What? No—we were just sort of talking. About things."

Ames dropped an ice cube into his drink. "Things?" he said.

"Yeah."

Ames took a sip of the whiskey and walked to the window, looking lithe, somehow, as well as small. After what seemed a long time, he said, "Well, it's a fine night, isn't it. Nice and clear, nice fine moon." He turned and tapped a cigarette out of a red package, lighted the cigarette. "Hank," he said, letting the gray smoke gush from the corners of his mouth, "tell me something. What do you do for excitement?"

Prentice shrugged. It was an odd question, but then, everything seemed odd to him tonight. "I don't know," he said. "Go to a movie once in a while. Watch TV. The usual."

Ames cocked his head. "But—don't you get bored?" he asked.

"Sure, I guess. Every so often. Being a C.P.A. you know, that isn't exactly the world's most fascinating job."

Ames laughed sympathetically. "It's awful, isn't it?"

"Being a C.P.A.?"

"No. Being bored. It's about the worst thing in the

world, don't you agree? Someone once remarked they thought it was the only real sin a human could commit."

"I hope not," Prentice said.

"Why?"

"Well, I mean—everybody gets bored, don't they?"

"Not," Ames said, "if they're careful."

Prentice found himself becoming increasingly irritated at the conversation. "I suppose it helps," he said, "if you're the head of an advertising agency."

"No, not really. It's like any other job: interesting at first, but then you get used to it. It becomes routine. So you go fishing for other diversions."

"Like what?"

"Oh . . . anything. Everything." Ames slapped Prentice's arm good naturedly. "You're all right, Hank," he said.

"Thanks."

"I mean it. Can't tell you how happy we all are that you moved here."

"No more than we are!" Ann walked unsteadily to the sink with a number of empty glasses. "I want to apologize for Davey again, Lucian. I was telling Charlotte, he's been a perfect beast lately. He should have thanked you for fixing the seat on his bike."

"Forget it," Ames said, cheerfully. "The boy's just upset because he doesn't have any playmates." He looked at Prentice. "Some of us elders have kids, Hank, but they're all practically grown. You probably know that our daughter, Ginnie, is away at college. And Chris and Beth's boy lives in New York. But, you know, I wouldn't worry. As soon as school starts, Davey'll straighten out. You watch."

Ann smiled. "I'm sure you're right, Lucian. But I apologize, anyway."

"Nuts." Ames returned to the living room and began to dance with Beth Cummings.

Prentice thought then of asking Ann what the devil she meant by blabbing about their personal life to strangers, but decided not to. This was not the time. He was too angry, too confused.

The party lasted another hour. Then Ben Roth said,

"Better let these good folks get some sleep!" and, slowly, the people left.

Ann closed the door. She seemed to glow with contentment, looking younger and prettier than she had for several years. "Home," she said, softly, and began picking up ash trays and glasses and plates. "Let's get all this out of the way so we won't have to look at it in the morning," she said.

Prentice said, "All right," in a neutral tone. He was about to move the coffee table back into place when the telephone rang.

"Yes?"

The voice that answered was a harsh whisper, like a rush of wind through leaves. "Prentice, are they gone?"

"Who is this?"

"Matt Dystal. Are they gone?"

"Yes."

"All of them? Ames? Is he gone?"

"Yes. What do you want, Dystal? It's late."

"Later than you might think, Prentice. He told you I was drunk, but he lied. I'm not drunk. I'm—"

"Look, what is it you want?"

"I've got to talk with you," the voice said. "Now. Tonight. Can you come over?"

"At eleven o'clock?"

"Yes. Prentice, listen to me. I'm not drunk and I'm not kidding. This is a matter of life and death. Yours. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

Prentice hesitated, confused.

"You know where my place is—fourth house from the corner, right-hand side. Come over now. But listen, carefully: go out the back door. The back door. Prentice, are you listening?"

"Yes," Prentice said.

"My lights will be off. Go around to the rear. Don't bother to knock, just walk in—but be quiet about it. They mustn't see you."

Prentice heard a click, then silence. He stared at the receiver for a while before replacing it.

"Well?" Ann said. "Man talk?"

"Not exactly." Prentice wiped his palm on his trousers.

"That fellow Matt Dystal, he's apparently sick. Wants me to come over."

"Now?"

"Yeah. I think I better; he sounded pretty bad. You go on to sleep, I'll be back in a little while."

"Okay, honey. I hope it isn't anything serious. But, it *is* nice to be doing something for *them* for a change, isn't it?"

Prentice kissed his wife, waited until the bathroom door had closed; then he went outside, into the cold night.

He walked along the grass verge of the alleyway, across the small lawns, up the steps to Dystal's rear door.

He deliberated with himself for a moment, then walked in.

"Prentice?" a voice hissed.

"Yes. Where are you?"

A hand touched his arm in the darkness and he jumped, nervously. "Come into the bedroom."

A dim lamp went on. Prentice saw that the windows were covered by heavy tan drapes. It was chilly in the room, chilly and moist.

"Well?" Prentice said, irritably.

Matthew Dystal ran a hand through his rope-colored hair. "I know what you're thinking," he said. "And I don't blame you. But it was necessary, Prentice. It was necessary. Ames has told you about my 'wild nightmares' and that's going to stick with you, I realize; but get this straight." His hand became a fist. "Everything I'm about to say is true. No matter how outlandish it may sound, it's *true*—and I have proof. All you'll need. So keep still, Prentice, and listen to me. It may mean your life: yours and your wife's and your boy's. And, maybe, mine . . ." His voice trailed off; then, suddenly, he said, "You want a drink?"

"No."

"You ought to have one. You're only on the outskirts of confusion, my friend. But, there are worse things than confusion. Believe me." Dystal walked to a bookcase and stood there for almost a full minute. When he turned, his features were slightly more composed. "What do you know," he asked, "about the house you're living in?"

Prentice shifted uncomfortably. "I know that a man killed himself in it, if that's what you mean."

"But do you know why?"

"No."

"Because he lost," Dystal said, giggling. "He drew the short one. How's that for motivation?"

"I think I'd better go," Prentice said.

"Wait." Dystal took a handkerchief from his pocket and tapped his forehead. "I didn't mean to begin that way. It's just that I've never told this to anyone, and it's difficult. You'll see why. Please, Prentice, promise you won't leave until I've finished!"

Prentice looked at the wiry, nervous little man and cursed the weakness that had allowed him to get himself into this miserably uncomfortable situation. He wanted to go home. But he knew he could not leave now.

"All right," he said. "Go on."

Dystal sighed. Then, staring at the window, he began to talk. "I built this house," he said, "because I thought I was going to get married. By the time I found out I was wrong, the work was all done. I should have sold it, I know, I see that, but I was feeling too lousy to go through the paper work. Besides, I'd already given up my apartment. So I moved in." He coughed. "Be patient with me, Prentice: this is the only way to tell it, from the beginning. Where was I?"

"You moved in."

"Yes! Everybody was very nice. They invited me to their homes for dinner, they dropped by, they did little favors for me; and it helped, it really did. I thought, you know, what a hell of a great bunch of neighbors. Regular. *Real*. That was it: they were real. Ames, an advertising man; Thomas, a lawyer; Johnson, paint company; Chambers, insurance; Reiker and Cummings, engineers—I mean, how average can you get?" Dystal paused; an ugly grin appeared on his face, disappeared. "I liked them," he said. "And I was really delighted with things. But, of course, you know how it is when a woman gives you the business. I was still licking my wounds. And I guess it showed, because Ames came over one evening. Just dropped by, in a neighborly way. We had some drinks. We talked about the ways of the

female. Then, bang, out of nowhere, he asked me the question. Was I bored?"

Prentice stiffened.

"Well, when you lose your girl, you lose a lot of your ambition. I told him yes, I was plenty bored. And he said, 'I used to be.' I remember his exact words. 'I used to be,' he said. 'The long haul to success, the fight, the midnight oil: it was over. I'd made it,' he said. 'Dough in the bank. Partnership in a top agency. Daughter grown and away to school. I was ready to be put out to pasture, Matt. But the thing was, I was only fifty-two! I had maybe another twenty years left. And almost everybody else in the block was the same way—Ed and Ben and Oscar, all the same. You know: they fooled around with their jobs, but they weren't interested any more—not really. Because the jobs didn't *need* them any more. They were bored.' " Dystal walked to the nightstand and poured himself a drink. "That was five years ago," he murmured. "Ames, he pussy-footed around the thing for a while—feeling me out, testing me; then he told me that he had decided to do something about it. About being bored. He'd organized everyone in the block. Once a week, he explained, they played games. It was real Group Activity. Community effort. It began with charades, but they got tired of that in a while. Then they tried cards. To make it interesting, they bet high. Everybody had his turn at losing. Then, Ames said, someone suggested making the game even *more* interesting, because it was getting to be a drag. So they experimented with strip poker one night. Just for fun, you understand, Rhoda lost. Next time it was Charlotte. And it went that way for a while, until finally, Beth lost. Everyone had been waiting for it. Things became anticlimactic after that, though, so the stakes changed again. Each paired off with another's wife; lowest scoring team had to—" Dystal tipped the bottle. "Sure you won't have a bracer?"

Prentice accepted the drink without argument. It tasted bitter and powerful, but it helped.

"Well," Dystal went on, "I had one hell of a time believing all that. I mean, you know: *Ames*, after all—a little bookkeeper type with gray hair and glasses . . . Still, the way he talked, I knew—somehow, I *knew*—it was

the truth. Maybe because I didn't feel that a guy like Ames could make it all up! Anyway: when they'd tried all the possible combinations, things got dull again. A few of the women wanted to stop, but, of course, they were in too deep already. During one particular Fun Night, Ames had taken photographs. So, they had to keep going. Every week, it was something new. Something different. Swapsies occupied them for a while, Ames told me: Chambers took a two week vacation with Jacqueline, Ben and Beth went to Acapulco, and that sort of thing. And that is where I came into the picture." Dystal raised his hand. "I know, you don't need to tell me, I should have pulled out. But I was younger then. I was a big writer, man of the world. Training in Hollywood. I couldn't tell him I was shocked: it would have been betraying my craft. And he figured it that way, too: that's why he told me. Besides, he knew I'd be bound to find out eventually. They could hide it from just about everybody, but not someone right in the block. So, I played along. I accepted his invitation to join the next Group Activity—which is what he calls them.

"Next morning, I thought I'd dreamed the whole visit, I really did. But on Saturday, sure enough, the phone rings and Ames says, 'We begin at eight, sharp.' When I got to his house, I found it packed. Everybody in the neighborhood. Looking absolutely the same as always too. Drinks; dancing; the whole bit. After a while, I started to wonder if the whole thing wasn't an elaborate gag. But at ten, Ames told us about the evening's surprise." Dystal gave way to a shudder. "It was a surprise, all right," he said. "I told them I wanted nothing to do with it, but Ames had done something to my drink. I didn't seem to have any control. They led me into the bedroom, and . . ."

Prentice waited, but Dystal did not complete his sentence. His eyes were dancing now.

"Never mind," he said. "Never mind what happened! The point is, I was drunk, and—well, I went through with it. I *had* to. You can see that, can't you?"

Prentice said that he could see that.

"Ames pointed out to me that the only sin, the *only* one, was being bored. That was his justification, that was

his incentive. He simply didn't want to sin, that was all. So the Group Activities went on. And they got worse. Much worse. One thing, they actually plotted a crime and carried it off: the Union bank robbery, maybe you read about it: 1953. I drove the car for them. Another time, they decided it would ward off ennui by setting fire to a warehouse down by the docks. The fire spread. Prentice—do you happen to remember that DC-7 that went down between here and Detroit?"

Prentice said, "Yes, I remember."

"Their work," Dystal said. "Ames planned it. In a way, I think he's a genius. I could spend all night telling you the things we did, but there isn't time. I've got to skip." He placed his fingers over his eyes. "Joan of Arc," he said, "was the turning point. Ames had decided that it would be diverting to re-enact famous scenes from literature. So he and Bud went down to Main Street, I think it was, and found a beat doll who thought the whole thing would be fun. They gave her twenty-five dollars, but she never got a chance to spend it. I remember that she laughed right up to the point where Ames lit the pile of oil-soaked rags . . . Afterward, they re-enacted other scenes. The execution of Marie Antoinette. The murder of Hamlet's father. You know *The Man in the Iron Mask*? They did that one. And a lot more. It lasted quite a while, too, but Ames began to get restless." Dystal held out his hands suddenly and stared at them. "The next game was a form of Russian roulette. We drew straws. Whoever got the short one had to commit suicide—in his own way. It was understood that if he failed, it would mean something much worse—and Ames had developed some damned interesting techniques. Like the nerve clamps, for instance. Thomas lost the game, anyway. They gave him twelve hours to get it over with."

Prentice felt a cold film of perspiration over his flesh. He tried to speak, but found that it was impossible. The man, of course, was crazy. Completely insane. But—he had to hear the end of the story. "Go on," he said.

Dystal ran his tongue across his lower lip, poured another drink and continued. "Cummings and Chambers got scared then," he said. "They argued that some stranger would move into the house and then there'd be all

sorts of trouble. We had a meeting at Reiker's, and Chris came out with the idea of us all chipping in and buying the place. But Ames didn't go for it. 'Let's not be so darned exclusive,' he said. 'After all, the new people might be bored, too. Lord knows we could use some fresh blood in the Group.' Cummings was pessimistic. He said, 'What if you're wrong? What if they don't want to join us?' Ames laughed it off. 'I hope,' he said, 'that you don't think we're the only ones. Why, every city has its neighborhoods just like ours. We're really not that unique.' And then he went on to say that if the new people didn't work out, he would take care of the situation. He didn't say how."

Dystal looked out the window again.

"I can see that he's almost ready to give you an invitation, Prentice. Once that happens, you're finished. It's join them or accept the only alternative."

Suddenly the room was very quiet.

"You don't believe me, do you?"

Prentice opened his mouth.

"No, of course you don't. It's a madman's ravings. Well, I'm going to prove it to you, Prentice." He started for the door. "Come on. Follow me; but don't make any noise."

Dystal walked out the back door, closed it, moved soundlessly across the soft, black grass.

"They're on a mystic kick right now," he whispered to Prentice. "Ames is trying to summon the devil. Last week we slaughtered a dog and read the Commandments backward; the week before, we did some chants out of an old book that Ben found in the library; before that it was orgies—" He shook his head. "It isn't working out, though. God knows why. You'd think the devil would be so delighted with Ames that he'd sign him up for the team."

Prentice followed his neighbor across the yards, walking carefully, and wondering why. He thought of his neat little office on Harmon Street, old Mrs. Gleason, the clean, well-lighted restaurant where he had his lunch and read newspaper headlines; and they seemed terribly far away.

Why, he asked himself, am I creeping around backyards with a lunatic at midnight?

Why?

"The moon is full tonight, Prentice. That means they'll be trying again."

Silently, without the slightest sound, Matthew Dystal moved across the lawns, keeping always to the shadows. A minute later he raised his hand and stopped.

They were at the rear of the Ames'es' house.

It was dark inside.

"Come on," Dystal whispered.

"Wait a minute." Somehow, the sight of his own living room, still blazing with light, reassured Prentice. "I think I've had enough for this evening."

"Enough?" Dystal's face twisted grotesquely. He bunched the sleeve of Prentice's jacket in his fist. "Listen," he hissed, "listen, you idiot. I'm risking my life to help you. Don't you understand yet? If they find out I've talked . . ." He released the sleeve. "Prentice, *please*. You have a chance now, a chance to clear out of this whole stinking mess; but you won't have it long— Believe me!"

Prentice sighed. "What do you want me to do?" he said.

"Nothing. Just come with me, quietly. They're in the basement."

Breathing hard now, Dystal tiptoed around to the side of the house. He stopped at a small, earth-level window. It was closed.

"Prentice. *Softly*. Bend down and keep out of view."

In invisible, slow movements, Dystal reached out and pushed the window. It opened a half inch. He pushed it again. It opened another half inch.

Prentice saw yellow light stream out of the crack. Instantly his throat felt very dry, very painful.

There was a noise. A low, murmurous sound; a susurrus like distant humming.

"What's that?"

Dystal put a finger to his lips and motioned: "Here."

Prentice knelt down at the window and looked into the light.

At first he could not believe what his eyes saw.

It was a basement, like other basements in old houses, with a large iron furnace and a cement floor and heavy

beams. This much he could recognize and understand. The rest, he could not.

In the center of the floor was a design, obviously drawn in colored chalks. It looked a bit, to Prentice, like a Star of David, although there were other designs around and within it. They were not particularly artistic, but they were intricate. In the middle was a large cup, similar to a salad bowl, vaguely familiar, empty.

"There," whispered Dystal, withdrawing.

Slightly to the left were drawn a circle and a pentagram, its five points touching the circumference equally.

Prentice blinked and turned his attention to the people.

Standing on a block of wood, surrounded by men and women, was a figure in a black robe and a serpent-shaped crown.

It was Ames.

His wife, Charlotte, dressed in a white gown, stood next to him. She held a brass lamp.

Also in robes and gowns were Ben and Rhoda Roth, Bud Reiker and his wife, the Cummingses, the Chamberses, the Johnsons—

Prentice shook away his sudden dizziness and shaded his eyes.

To the right, near the furnace, was a table with a white sheet draped across it. And two feet away, an odd, six-sided structure with black candles burning from a dozen apertures.

"Listen," Dystal said.

Ames' eyes were closed. Softly, he was chanting:

All degradation, all sheer infamy,

Thou shalt endure. Thy head beneath the mire.

And dung of worthless women shall desire

As in some hateful dream, at last to lie;

Woman must trample thee till thou respire

That deadliest fume;

The vilest worms must crawl, the loathliest vampires
gloom . . .

"The Great Beast," chuckled Dystal.

"I," said Ames, "am Ipsissimus," and the others chanted, "He is Ipsissimus."

"I have read the books, dark Lord. *The Book of Sacred Magic of Abra-Melin the Mage* I have read, and I reject it!"

"We reject it!" murmured the Roths.

"The power of Good shall be served by the power of Darkness, always."

He raised his hands. "In Thy altar is the stele of Ankf-f-n-Khonsu; there, also, *The Book of the Dead* and *The Book of the Law*, six candles to each side, my Lord, Bell, Burin, Lamén, Sword, Cup, and the Cakes of Life . . ."

Prentice looked at the people he had seen only a few hours ago in his living room, and shuddered. He felt very weak.

"We, your servants," said Ames, singing the words, "beseech your presence, Lord of Night and of Life Eternal, Ruler of the Souls of men in all Thy vast dominion . . ."

Prentice started to rise, but Dystal grasped his jacket. "No," he said. "Wait. Wait another minute. This is something you ought to see."

". . . we live to serve you; grant us . . ."

"He's begging the devil to appear," whispered Dystal.

". . . tonight, and offer the greatest and most treasured gift. Accept our offering!"

"Accept it!" cried the others.

"What the hell is this, anyway?" Prentice demanded, feverishly.

Then Ames stopped talking, and the rest were silent. Ames raised his left hand and lowered it. Chris Cummings and Bud Reiker bowed and walked backwards into the shadows where Prentice could not see them.

Charlotte Ames walked to the six-sided structure with the candles and picked up a long, thin object.

She returned and handed this to her husband.

It was a knife.

"*Killnotshaltthou!*" screamed Ed Chambers, and he stepped across the pentagram to the sheet-shrouded table.

Prentice rubbed his eyes.

"Shhh."

Bud Reiker and Chris Cummings returned to the center of light then. They were carrying a bundle. It was wrapped in blankets.

The bundle thrashed and made peculiar muffled noises. The men lifted it onto the table and held it.

Ames nodded and stepped down from the block of wood. He walked to the table and halted, the long-bladed butcher knife glittering in the glow of the candles.

"To Thee, O Lord of the Underground, we make this offering! To Thee, the rarest gift of all!"

"What is it?" Prentice asked. "What is this gift?"

Dystal's voice was ready and eager. "A virgin," he said.

Then they removed the blanket.

Prentice felt his eyes bursting from their sockets, felt his heart charging the walls of his chest.

"Ann," he said, in a choked whisper. "Ann!"

The knife went up.

Prentice scrambled to his feet and fought the dizziness. "Dystal," he cried. "Dystal, for God's sake, what are they doing? Stop them. You hear me? Stop them!"

"I can't," said Matthew Dystal, sadly. "It's too late. I'm afraid your wife said a few things she shouldn't have, Prentice. You see—we've been looking for a real one for such a long time . . ."

Prentice tried to lunge, but the effort lost him his balance. He fell to the ground. His arms and legs were growing numb, and he remembered, suddenly, the bitter taste of the drink he'd had.

"It really couldn't have been avoided, though," Dystal said. "I mean, the boy knew, and he'd have told you eventually. And you'd have begun investigating, and—oh, you understand. I told Lucian we should have bought the place, but he's so obstinate; thinks he knows everything! Now, of course, we'll have to burn it, and that does seem a terrible waste." He shook his head from side to side. "But don't you worry," he said. "You'll be asleep by then and, I promise, you won't feel a thing. Really."

Prentice turned his eyes from the window and screamed silently for a long time.

The Vanishing American

HE GOT THE NOTION SHORTLY AFTER FIVE O'CLOCK; AT least, a part of him did, a small part hidden down beneath all the conscious cells—he didn't get the notion until some time later. At exactly five P.M., the bell rang. At two minutes after, the chairs began to empty. There was the vast slamming of drawers, the straightening of rulers, the sound of bones snapping and mouths yawning and feet shuffling tiredly.

Mr. Minchell relaxed. He rubbed his hands together and relaxed and thought how nice it would be to get up and go home, like the others. But of course there was the tape, only three-quarters finished. He would have to stay.

He stretched and said good night to the people who filed past him. As usual, no one answered. When they had gone, he set his fingers pecking again over the keyboard. The *click-clicking* grew loud in the suddenly still office, but Mr. Minchell did not notice. He was lost in the work. Soon, he knew, it would be time for the totaling, and his pulse quickened at the thought of this.

He lit a cigarette. Heart tapping, he drew in smoke and released it.

He extended his right hand and rested his index and middle fingers on the metal bar marked TOTAL. A mile-long ribbon of paper lay gathered on the desk, strangely festive. He glanced at it, then at the manifest sheet. The figure 18037448 was circled in red. He pulled breath into his lungs, locked it there; then he closed his eyes and pressed the TOTAL bar.

There was a smooth low metallic grinding, followed by absolute silence.

Mr. Minchell opened one eye, dragged it from the ceiling on down to the adding machine.

He groaned, slightly.

The total read: 18037447.

"God." He stared at the figure and thought of the fifty-three pages of manifest, the three thousand separate rows of figures that would have to be checked again. "God."

The day was lost, now. Irretrievably. It was too late to do anything. Madge would have supper waiting, and F.J. didn't approve of overtime; also . . .

He looked at the total again. At the last two digits.

He sighed. Forty-seven. And thought, startled: Today, for the Lord's sake, is my birthday! Today I am forty—what?—forty-seven. And that explains the mistake, I suppose. Subconscious kind of thing. . . .

Slowly he got up and looked around the deserted office.

Then he went to the dressing room and got his hat and his coat and put them on, carefully.

"Pushing fifty now . . ."

The outside hall was dark. Mr. Minchell walked softly to the elevator and punched the *Down* button. "Forty-seven," he said, aloud; then, almost immediately, the light turned red and the thick door slid back noisily. The elevator operator, a bird-thin, tan-fleshed girl, swiveled her head, looking up and down the hall. "Going down," she said.

"Yes," Mr. Minchell said, stepping forward.

"Going down." The girl clicked her tongue and muttered, "Damn kids." She gave the lattice gate a tired push and moved the smooth wooden-handled lever in its slot.

Odd, Mr. Minchell decided, was the word for this particular girl. He wished now that he had taken the stairs. Being alone with only one other person in an elevator had always made him nervous: now it made him very nervous. He felt the tension growing. When it became unbearable, he cleared his throat and said, "Long day."

The girl said nothing. She had a surly look, and she seemed to be humming something deep in her throat.

Mr. Minchell closed his eyes. In less than a minute—during which time he dreamed of the cable snarling, of the car being caught between floors, of himself trying to make small talk with the odd girl for six straight hours—he opened his eyes again and walked into the lobby, briskly.

The gate slammed.

He turned and started for the doorway. Then he paused, feeling a sharp increase in his heartbeat. A large, red-faced, magnificently groomed man of middle years stood directly beyond the glass, talking with another man.

Mr. Minchell pushed through the door, with effort. He's seen me now, he thought. If he asks any questions, though, or anything, I'll just say I didn't put it on the time card; that ought to make it all right.

He nodded and smiled at the large man. "Good night, Mr. Diemel."

The man looked up briefly, blinked, and returned to his conversation.

Mr. Minchell felt a burning come into his face. He hurried on down the street. Now the notion—though it was not even that yet, strictly: it was more a vague feeling—swam up from the bottom of his brain. He remembered that he had not spoken directly to F. J. Diemel for over ten years, beyond a "Good morning". . . .

Ice-cold shadows fell off the tall buildings, staining the streets, now. Crowds of shoppers moved along the pavement like juggernauts, exhaustedly, but with great determination. Mr. Minchell looked at them. They all had furtive appearances, it seemed to him suddenly, even the children, as if each was fleeing from some hideous crime. They hurried along, staring.

But not, Mr. Minchell noticed, at him. Through him, yes. Past him. As the elevator operator had done, and now F. J. And had anyone said good night?

He pulled up his coat collar and walked toward the drugstore, thinking. He was forty-seven years old. At the current life-expectancy rate, he might have another seventeen or eighteen years left. And then death.

If you're not dead already.

He paused and for some reason remembered a story he'd once read in a magazine. Something about a man who dies and whose ghost takes up his duties, or something; anyway, the man didn't know he was dead—that was it. And at the end of the story, he runs into his own corpse.

Which is pretty absurd: he glanced down at his body. Ghosts don't wear \$36 suits, nor do they have trouble

pushing doors open, nor do their corns ache like blazes, and what the devil is wrong with me today?

He shook his head.

It was the tape, of course, and the fact that it was his birthday. That was why his mind was behaving so foolishly.

He went into the drugstore. It was an immense place, packed with people. He walked to the cigar counter, trying not to feel intimidated, and reached into his pocket. A small man elbowed in front of him and called loudly: "Gimme coupla nickels, will you, Jack?" The clerk scowled and scooped the change out of his cash register. The small man scurried off. Others took his place. Mr. Minchell thrust his arm forward. "A pack of Luckies, please," he said. The clerk whipped his fingers around a pile of cellophaned packages and, looking elsewhere, droned: "Twenty-six." Mr. Minchell put his twenty-six-cents-exactly on the glass shelf. The clerk shoved the cigarettes toward the edge and picked up the money, deftly. Not once did he lift his eyes.

Mr. Minchell pocketed the Luckies and went back out of the store. He was perspiring now, slightly, despite the chill wind. The word "ridiculous" lodged in his mind and stayed there. Ridiculous, yes, for heaven's sake. Still, he thought—now just answer the question—isn't it true? Can you honestly say that that clerk saw you?

Or that anybody saw you today?

Swallowing dryly, he walked another two blocks, always in the direction of the subway, and went into a bar called the Chez When. One drink would not hurt, one small, stiff, steadying shot.

The bar was a gloomy place, and not very warm, but there was a good crowd. Mr. Minchell sat down on a stool and folded his hands. The bartender was talking animatedly with an old woman, laughing with boisterous good humor from time to time. Mr. Minchell waited. Minutes passed. The bartender looked up several times, but never made a move to indicate that he had seen a customer.

Mr. Minchell looked at his old gray overcoat, the humbly floral tie, the cheap sharkskin suit-cloth, and became aware of the extent to which he detested this

ensemble. He sat there and detested his clothes for a long time. Then he glanced around. The bartender was wiping a glass, slowly.

All right, the hell with you. I'll go somewhere else.

He slid off the stool. Just as he was about to turn he saw the mirrored wall, pink-tinted and curved. He stopped, peering. Then he almost ran out of the bar.

Cold wind went into his head.

Ridiculous. The mirror was curved, you jackass. How do you expect to see yourself in curved mirrors?

He walked past high buildings, and now past the library and the stone lion he had once, long ago, named King Richard; and he did not look at the lion, because he'd always wanted to ride the lion, ever since he was a child, and he'd promised himself he would do that, but he never did.

He hurried on to the subway, took the stairs by two's, and clattered across the platform in time to board the express.

It roared and thundered. Mr. Minchell held onto the strap and kept himself from staring. No one watched him. No one even glanced at him when he pushed his way to the door and went out onto the empty platform.

He waited. Then the train was gone, and he was alone.

He walked up the stairs. It was fully night now, a soft, unshadowed darkness. He thought about the day and the strange things that were gouging into his mind and thought about all this as he turned down a familiar street which led to his familiar apartment.

The door opened.

His wife was in the kitchen, he could see. Her apron flashed across the arch, and back, and across. He called: "Madge, I'm home."

Madge did not answer. Her movements were regular. Jimmy was sitting at the table, drooling over a glass of pop, whispering to himself.

"I said—" Mr. Minchell began.

"Jimmy, get up and go to the bathroom, you hear? I've got your water drawn."

Jimmy promptly broke into tears. He jumped off the chair and ran past Mr. Minchell into the bedroom. The door slammed viciously.

"Madge."

Madge Minchell came into the room, tired and lined and heavy. Her eyes did not waver. She went into the bedroom, and there was a silence; then a sharp slapping noise, and a yelling.

Mr. Minchell walked to the bathroom, fighting down the small terror. He closed the door and locked it and wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. Ridiculous, he thought, and ridiculous and ridiculous. I am making something utterly foolish out of nothing. All I have to do is look in the mirror, and—

He held the handkerchief to his lips. It was difficult to breathe.

Then he knew that he was afraid, more so than ever before in a lifetime of being afraid.

Look at it this way, Minchell: why shouldn't you vanish?

"Young man, just you wait until your father gets here!"

He pushed the handkerchief against his mouth and leaned on the door and gasped.

"What do you mean, vanish?"

Go on, take a look. You'll see what I mean.

He tried to swallow, couldn't. Tried to wet his lips, found that they stayed dry.

"Lord—"

He slitted his eyes and walked to the shaving mirror and looked in.

His mouth fell open.

The mirror reflected nothing. It held nothing. It was dull and gray and empty.

Mr. Minchell stared at the glass, put out his hand, drew it back hastily.

He squinted. Inches away. There was a form now: vague, indistinct, featureless: but a form.

"Lord," he said. He understood why the elevator girl hadn't seen him, and why F. J. hadn't answered him, and why the clerk at the drugstore and the bartender and Madge . . .

"I'm not dead."

Of course you're not dead—not that way.

"—tan your hide, Jimmy Minchell, when he gets home."

Mr. Minchell suddenly wheeled and clicked the lock. He rushed out of the steam-filled bathroom, across the room, down the stairs, into the street, into the cool night.

A block from home he slowed to a walk.

Invisible! He said the word over and over, in a half-voice. He said it and tried to control the panic that pulled at his legs, and at his brain, and filled him.

Why?

A fat woman and a little girl passed by. Neither of them looked up. He started to call out and checked himself. No. That wouldn't do any good. There was no question about it now. He was invisible.

He walked on. As he did, forgotten things returned; they came and they left, too fast. He couldn't hold onto them. He could only watch, and remember. Himself as a youngster, reading: the Oz books, and Tarzan, and Mr. Wells. Himself, going to the University, wanting to teach, and meeting Madge; then not planning any more, and Madge changing, and all the dreams put away. For later. For the right time. And then Jimmy—little strange Jimmy, who ate filth and picked his nose and watched television, who never read books, never; Jimmy, his son, whom he would never understand. . . .

He walked by the edge of the park now. Then on past the park, through a maze of familiar and unfamiliar neighborhoods. Walking, remembering, looking at the people and feeling pain because he knew that they could not see him, not now or ever again, because he had vanished. He walked and remembered and felt pain.

All the stagnant dreams came back. Fully. The trip to Italy he'd planned. The open sports car, bad weather be damned. The firsthand knowledge that would tell him whether he did or did not approve of bullfighting. The book . . .

Then something occurred to him. It occurred to Mr. Minchell that he had not just suddenly vanished, like that, after all. No; he had been vanishing gradually for a long while. Every time he said good morning to that bastard Diemel he got a little harder to see. Every time he put on this horrible suit he faded. The process of disappearing was set into action every time he brought his paycheck home and turned it over to Madge, every

time he kissed her, or listened to her vicious unending complaints, or decided against buying that novel, or punched the adding machine he hated so, or . . .

Certainly.

He had vanished for Diemel and the others in the office years ago. And for strangers right afterwards. Now even Madge and Jimmy couldn't see him. And he could barely see himself, even in a mirror.

It made terrible sense to him. *Why shouldn't you disappear?* Well, why, indeed? There wasn't any good reason, actually. None. And this, in a nightmarish sort of a way, made it as brutally logical as a perfect tape.

Then he thought about going back to work tomorrow and the next day and the day after that. He'd have to, of course. He couldn't let Madge and Jimmy starve; and, besides, what else would he do? It wasn't as if anything important had changed. He'd go on punching the clock and saying good morning to people who didn't see him, and he'd run the tapes and come home beat, nothing altered, and some day he'd die and that would be that.

All at once he felt tired.

He sat down on a cement step and sighed. Distantly he realized that he had come to the library. He sat there, watching the people, feeling the tiredness seep through him, thickly.

Then he looked up.

Above him, black and regal against the sky, stood the huge stone lion. Its mouth was open, and the great head was raised proudly.

Mr. Minchell smiled. King Richard. Memories scattered in his mind: old King Richard, well, my God, here we are.

He got to his feet. Fifty thousand times, at least, he had passed this spot, and every time he had experienced that instant of wild craving. Less so of late, but still, had it ever completely gone? He was amazed to find that now the childish desire was welling up again, stronger than ever before. Urgently.

He rubbed his cheek and stood there for several minutes. It's the most ridiculous thing in the world, he thought, and I must be going out of my mind, and that

must explain everything. But, he inquired of himself, even so, why not?

After all, I'm invisible. No one can see me. Of course, it didn't have to be this way, not really. I don't know, he went on, I mean, I believed that I was doing the right thing. Would it have been right to go back to the University and the hell with Madge? I couldn't change that, could I? Could I have done anything about that, even if I'd known?

He nodded sadly.

All right, but don't make it any worse. Don't for God's sake *dwell* on it!

To his surprise, Mr. Minchell found that he was climbing up the concrete base of the statue. It ripped the breath from his lungs—and he saw that he could much more easily have gone up a few extra steps and simply stepped on—but there didn't seem anything else to do but just this, what he was doing. Once upright, he passed his hand over the statue's flank. The surface was incredibly sleek and cold, hard as a lion's muscles ought to be, and tawny.

He took a step backwards. Lord! Had there ever been such power? Such marvelous downright power and—majesty, as was here? From stone—no, indeed. It fooled a good many people, but it did not fool Mr. Minchell. He knew. This lion was no mere library decoration. It was an animal, of deadly cunning and fantastic strength and unbelievable ferocity. And it didn't move for the simple reason that it did not care to move. It was waiting. Some day it would see what it was waiting for, its enemy, coming down the street. Then look out, people!

He remembered the whole yarn now. Of everyone on Earth, only he, Henry Minchell, knew the secret of the lion. And only he was allowed to sit astride this mighty back.

He stepped onto the tail, experimentally. He hesitated, gulped, and swung forward, swiftly, on up to the curved rump.

Trembling, he slid forward, until finally he was over the shoulders of the lion, just behind the raised head.

His breath came very fast.

He closed his eyes.

It was not long before he was breathing regularly again. Only now it was the hot, fetid air of the jungle that went into his nostrils. He felt the great muscles ripple beneath him and he listened to the fast crackle of crushed foliage, and he whispered:

"Easy, fellow."

The flying spears did not frighten him; he sat straight, smiling, with his fingers buried in the rich tawny mane of King Richard, while the wind tore at his hair. . . .

Then, abruptly, he opened his eyes.

The city stretched before him, and the people, and the lights. He tried quite hard not to cry, because he knew that forty-seven-year-old men never cried, not even when they had vanished, but he couldn't help it. So he sat on the stone lion and lowered his head and cried.

He didn't hear the laughter at first.

When he did hear it, he thought that he was dreaming. But it was true: somebody was laughing.

He grasped one of the statue's ears for balance and leaned forward. He blinked. Below, some fifteen feet, there were people. Young people. Some of them with books. They were looking up and smiling and laughing.

Mr. Minchell wiped his eyes.

A slight horror came over him, and fell away. He leaned farther out.

One of the boys waved and shouted: "Ride him, Pop!"

Mr. Minchell almost toppled. Then, without understanding, without even trying to understand—merely knowing—he grinned widely, showing his teeth, which were his own and very white.

"You—see me?" he called.

The young people roared.

"You do!" Mr. Minchell's face seemed to melt upwards. He let out a yell and gave King Richard's shaggy stone mane an enormous hug.

Below, other people stopped in their walking and a small crowd began to form. Dozens of eyes peered sharply, quizzically.

A woman in gray furs giggled.

A thin man in a blue suit grunted something about these damned exhibitionists.

"You pipe down," another man said. "Guy wants to ride the goddam lion it's his own business."

There were murmurings. The man who had said pipe down was small and he wore black-rimmed glasses. "I used to do it all the time." He turned to Mr. Minchell and cried: "How is it?"

Mr. Minchell grinned. Somehow, he realized, in some mysterious way, he had been given a second chance. And this time he knew what he would do with it. "Fine!" he shouted, and stood upon King Richard's back and sent his derby spinning out over the heads of the people. "Come on up!"

"Can't do it," the man said. "Got a date." There was a look of profound admiration in his eyes as he strode off. Away from the crowd he stopped and cupped his hands and cried: "I'll be seeing you!"

"That's right," Mr. Minchell said, feeling the cold new wind on his face. "You'll be seeing me."

Later, when he was good and ready, he got down off the lion.

The Monster Show

"IS IT SOCK?" THE BIG MAN INQUIRED NERVOUSLY, flicking a tablet into his mouth.

"It is sock," the Official Coordinator of TV Production replied. "It is wham and boff. I give you my word."

"I give it back to you. Words mean nothing. It's pictures that count. Flap?"

"Sure; flap, flap," the Official Coordinator said, and slipped a small needle into a large vein. "But I tell you, B. P., there is nothing to worry about. We have got thirty cameras regular and sixty in reserve. For every actor, two stand-ins. In fact, we have even got stand-ins for the stand-ins. Nothing can go wrong. Nothing-O."

The Big Man collapsed into a chair and moved a handkerchief rhythmically across his neck. "I don't know," he said. "I am worried."

"What you should do, B. P.," the Official Coordinator said, "is you should relax."

The Big Man belched a picture off the wall. "Relax!" he shouted. "The most expensive TV production in history and he tells me to relax!"

"B. P., flap this. Everything is scatty-boo, A through Z. We absotively and posilutely cannot miss."

"I just don't know," the Big Man said, shaking his head.

The Official Coordinator removed a red pellet from an onyx case and tossed it into his mouth. "Boss, listen to me for a double-mo. Listen. Close the eyes. Now: You are no longer the Chief and Commander of Production of the World's Largest TV Studio—"

The Big Man trembled slightly.

"You are, instead, Mr. Average World Family, 1976 A.D. Flap?"

"Flap, flap."

"Kay. You are sitting in front of your two-thirds-paid-

for 150-inch non-curved wall T-Viewer. You are in your undershirt. The missus has poured you a beer and you are munching Cheese Drackles. Reety-O. Suddenly you see that it is two minutes to eight. You jab the auto-ray and switch channels right away, if you are sucker enough to be on another channel, which, thanks to those lousy feebs at OBC, maybe you are. But not for long! Because for six months you have been hearing about it. The biggest, the greatest, the most spectacular, the *most expensive* production ever to hit the screen. Said I biggest? Said I greatest? Said I most spectacular? Father-O, this is a veritybobble *monster* of a show! So what do we call it? Natcheroony: *The Monster Show!* 'EVERYBODY WILL BE WATCHING IT—WILL YOU?' These words, Mr. Average World Family, are stamped into your brain. You've seen them everywhere: billboards, leaflets, sky-writing, magazine ads, the regular 15-minute daily commersh: and you've *heard* them everywhere, too: in busses and planes and cars, from your children—"

"Meant to tell you," the Big Man interrupted, "getting at the children was a good move."

"What about the parrots?"

"The parrots was also a good move."

"I blush, B. P. But hearken-O: There you are. Are you there?"

"Proceed on. I am ears."

"Kay. It is one minute to eight. You are shaking with excitement. Just like all the rest of the Folks everywhere else. In the bars, in the theatres, in the homes. Some with 90-foot curvo screens, some with modest 40-inchers, some even—like the cops and all—with nothing but their wrist-peeps. But they're with ya: you know that. Get the image, B. P. All over the world, everything stopped, everybody staring at their sets, waiting, waiting . . ."

"What about the competition?"

The Official Coordinator stuck his hands in his pockets and did a sort of dance. "B. P., Uncle-O—there isn't any!" He grinned widely. "And *that* is my surprise."

The Big Man opened his eyes. He clutched the arms of the chair. "How's that, how's that?"

"You tell me no stories, I'll tell you no untruths," the Official Coordinator smirked. "Baby, they have scratched

themselves. Us they do not choose to buck. They are offering to the folks in place of their usual maloop a kitty of our own show—which I got a hefty slap for which, Mother-O . . .”

“Now, now,” said the Big Man, smiling slyly, “you did not muscle the OBC boys a little, I hope?”

“Truth-O, Uncle. Nay. They plain quit. The eight spot is *ours!*” The Official Coordinator slapped his hands together. “And who’s to blame them? What *The Monster Show* has not got you can mount on the sharp end of an isotope. Flap this: We begin with a two-hour commercial round-up, advertising the products of our 57 sponsors: General Turbines, Sleep Neat Capsules, Chewey-Flakes, the Komfy-Kool TV Furniture line and ek-cetera. But are these ordinary commershes? Noo. We have them tricked out so they look prezactly like the show. Excavate?”

“Yo.”

“Kay. Then: into the show. And *what* a show! I ask you, Mr. Average World Family, at night when you’re all blasted out and ready for the old air-matt do you like to get spooned a lot of maloop you have got to *think* about, or do you like to get *round?*”

The Big Man made a solemn circle with his finger.

“And what is the roundest? Something long and complex and all drawn out? Nay. *Variety*: that’s what is the roundest. So we give you a variety show. Starting things off with a kronch, we have a half-hour trained dog act. Then right into fifteen minutes of old Western movie footage, with the middle reel of a British mystery for the capper. Then a full hour of wrestling, male and female. Ears?”

“Ears.”

“A mere starteroo, B. P. We punch ’em with twenty minutes of hillbilly-style Used Car commersh, and then we *really* start fighting. A right cross with Rev. Vincent Bell on *How to Live Up to the Hilt*: a left jab with the first installment of a new detergent-opera, *Jill Jackson, Jet-Wife*: an uppercut to the jaw with *Who’s Zoo*—keep moving; don’t give ’em a chance to think, see—followed by a flurry of lightning blows to the face and body: *Chef Gaston Escargot’s School of Cookery!* Mike

Tomerist, Private Op! A Ten-Year Roundup of Stock Turbo and Jaloppy Racing! A musical remake of the old motion picture *Waterloo Bridge*, now called *London Derrierel*!" The Official Coordinator was warming to his topic: his eyes were wide and his lower lip moist. "Do we swing?"

The Big Man nodded. "Speaking as Mr. Average World Family," he said, "I am getting slightly interested. Wing on."

"Well, we got 'em dizzy now, flap? Kay. We ease off with a handcream commersh: you know, the voodoo dance routine? Thirty minutes. Then, quos! Right in the old schwanzola!"

"What do we do, what do we do?" the Big Man asked.

"We let 'em have it. POW!" The Official Coordinator needled a vein ecstatically, and exploded: "The old hay-maker. The slamboreeno. *Twenty* of the world's greatest comedians on-stage, going through their most famous routines, *all at the same time!*"

There was a pregnant pause.

Then the Big Man shot from his chair, extruded a hirsute hand and laid it gently on the Official Coordinator's shoulder.

"One thing," he said, with genuine concern.

"Yes?" the Official Coordinator quavered.

"Do we have *enough?*"

"B. P., I think we do. I really and truly think we do." The Coordinator quickly rolled three pellets into his mouth and grimaced.

"Then," said the Big Man, "I feel that we ought to be mighty proud. And, flap me, mighty humble, too. Because we are giving the world public the thing they want and need most: *Entertainment.*" He winked gravely. "Also, we are making for ourselves a few drachmae. Excavate?"

The Official Coordinator brushed a tear of satisfaction from his cheek. "Boss," he said in cathedral tones, "I promise you this. This I promise you. *Everybody* on Earth is going to be watching *The Monster Show* tonight. It is going to be an experience no one will forget. In fact, I will far-enough-go to say that it will be the most important moment in history!"

The Big Man squeezed the Coordinator's fleshy digits

and smiled. "Screech," he said. "You've done poo-goo. Now powder: the mind must rest."

The Coordinator nodded, tugged at his forelock, and exited through the bullet-proof sliding door.

When it was firmly shut, the Big Man went over and locked it; then he removed from his pocket a flat disc with three knobs. He twiddled the knobs.

There was a humming.

"As planned," the Big Man said, and put the triple-knobbed disc back into his pocket.

His face was curiously devoid of expression. There was perhaps a trace of amusement about the mouth-ends as he went to the chromium bar and poured himself a shot of amber; perhaps not. He tilted the glass, swallowed, hiccoughed, set the glass down and punched the inter-office audiobox. "Miss Dovecoat," he said, "please flap me good. I will see no one between now and the show. Out?"

"And over," the voice of Miss Dovecoat crackled.

The Big Man sat in the chair, silent and unmoving, expressionless as a barracuda, for four and a half hours.

At ten minutes to eight he pressed seventeen levers on his desk and listened to seventeen yessirs.

"Report?" he barked.

"Scatoreeny, sir," came the answer like a celestial choir somewhat off-key.

"Sure?"

"Absotive and posilute."

"Everything moving?"

"With an 'o'. With a 'k'."

"Unbad, gentlemen."

"You snap the whip, we'll take the voyage."

"Ears out, now. *Coverage?*"

"One-hundred-percent."

"100% one hundred-percent?"

"100% one hundred-percent 100%!"

"Kay. Gentlemen: Proceed on."

The Big Man turned off all the levers and touched a concealed desk button. The three walls of the room seemed to shimmer and reshape themselves into a perfect curve; then they became clear. The image of a man

fifty feet tall appeared. He was smiling and pouring a hundred gallons of beer into a gigantic glass.

" . . . so get those taste buds unlimbered, folksies, and treat yourselves to the world's favorite brew: Rocky Mountain! Yes! That's absotively right! I said Rocky Mountain! And . . ."

In moments the giant man faded, and there was a portentous pause.

Then, the sound of a thousand trumpets, and an aerial shot of 70 hand-picked chorus girls, so arranged as to spell out:

THE MONSTER SHOW

The Big Man waited a moment, until the Emcee had come on-stage, then he snapped the concealed button and the walls became walls again.

He removed the triple-knobbed disc. "Now," he said, and slumped into a chair.

Hours passed, but he did not move.

Finally, there was a sharp knock at the bullet-proof sliding door.

The Big Man went to the door and opened it, cautiously. Eight lavender creatures with slimy skin and no noses at all were at the threshold.

"Well?" the Big Man said. "How did it go?"

One of the creatures, slightly more lavender than the rest, stepped forward. "Extremely well," it said. "In fact, perfectly. The Earth people are all dead. Thanks, Volshak, to you."

"Nonsense," the Big Man said, turning into a lavender creature with slimy skin and no nose at all. "I have had quite enough idolatry. I prefer to think of myself as an agent who tried to do his job."

"Volshak, Volshak," the creature hissed, "Such modesty is touching, and a credit to our race; but there is no getting around it. You are a hero. Why, if there had been the slightest resistance, we would have failed. We had a few weapons, a bare handful of warriors—frankly, we were very nearly ready to descend into The Great

Abyss. But even the gulfs are full of vanquished invaders: we did not have, so to speak, a pit to pass in. But now we may revel in the sunlight and enjoy the blessings of propagation on a new world without having lost a single thrimp." The creature put a boneless tentacle forward. "How did you manage it? Volshak, *how* did you manage to put *all* the Earth people to sleep at the same time?"

But Volshak was blushing. He turned his unproboscidean face to the wall and muttered, in a small, proud voice: "It was easy."

The Magic Man

IN THE CLEAR SEPTEMBER MOONLIGHT NOW THE PRAIRIE lay silent and cool and the color of lakes. Dust coated it like rich fur, and there was only the night wind sliding and sighing across the tabled land, and the wolves—always the wolves—screaming loneliness at the skies: otherwise, silence, as immense as the end of things.

Dr. Silk thought about this as he tried to pull sleep into his head. It had been a long day, full of miles and sweat and blasting sun, and he should be sleeping, like Obadiah, resting for tomorrow, the Lord knew. Why else had the night been created? Yet, here he was, wide awake. Thinking.

With his knife-sharp brittle thigh, the old man sought some supporting softness in the thin straw mattress. Then, at last, feeling the covers slip to the floor, he snorted, swung his feet over the side of the pallet, and sat for a while, rubbing the back of his neck.

"You got troubles, Doctor?" Obadiah's voice was mildly alarmed; if he had been awakened it was impossible to tell. "You sick?"

"No troubles," Dr. Silk said, shaking his head. "Got to get a breath of air is all."

"You want to be careful and not take the cold."

"I'll be careful."

Outside the wagon, the night was chill. Dr. Silk got out his hand-carved pipe and sat down on the wagon steps and watched the wind for a while. He watched it race along the prairie, lifting dust and making little gray dances, and he began to think, as he had many times before on just such nights, of the invisible life that surrounded him, existing in unseen magic.

Magic. He held the word, smiled, and glanced along the wagon. Its colors were faded now, but in the glow of moon they blazed: reds and yellows and oranges and

bright greens. And the big-lettered printing, vivid with scrollwork:

THE MAGIC MAN
Wonders Performed Before Your Eyes!

Dr. Silk began to feel very good again, after . . . months. It must be months. He forgot about the cold, pulled at his pipe, and let tomorrow take form.

It warmed him.

For something wonderful was going to happen: tomorrow Dr. Silk—no; Micah Jackson—the foolish, cranky, asthmatic old man who creaked when he walked, who snuffled and sneezed and coughed and wandered the land in a wagon, mostly lonely, mostly tired—this prune-wrinkled sack of ancient bones—would disappear. Allakazam! Micah Jackson would disappear. And in his place there would be an elegant gentleman in a brocade vest and a black top hat and a suit as dark as midnight: *The Magic Man, Doctor Silk—Prince, Emperor, Bringer of Mysteries and Wonders and Miracles.*

Tentatively, his fingers made an invisible coin vanish: he leaned back and thought now of the children. Of their fresh faces and their wide wondering eyes. In a while his pipe died, but he did not notice . . .

Then dawn came, slowly, spilling its cold light over the desert. Leather-toned dust had mounded up around the wagon wheels and the still sleeping mules, high, as if the rig were some forgotten tomb unburied for an hour. Dr. Silk blinked crusted eyelids and wondered whether he'd actually dozed off. It didn't seem so. But, in any case, he felt just fine.

"Obadiah!" It was very early. Far ahead and low he could see the moon, wafer-thin, unreal, ready to wink instantly out. And it was deaf-quiet. "Obadiah!" He knocked the pain out of his bones and moved up the steps. "You aim to sleep all day?"

The old Negro's eyes came open; a sheen of silver covered his face. "Morning," he said, uncertainly.

"Morning. How about some breakfast?"

"You want breakfast?" A glass of applejack usually sufficed for Dr. Silk. He disliked soft foods and was

fearful of anything that might cause further damage to his already chipped and cracking plates.

"Of course! Coffee, and beans, and maybe a couple biscuits."

"Yes, sir. Biscuits." Obadiah dressed quickly, and began to rummage. "We must be getting close."

"If we move," Dr. Silk said, "we ought to reach Two Forks by late afternoon: three, four o'clock, the way I see it."

"How about the medicine?" Obadiah gestured toward the rows of empty bottles strapped to the wall. They were labeled: DOCTOR SILK'S WONDEROL—A SOOTHING REMEDY FOR HEADACHE, STOMACH CRAMPS, QUINSY, DIZZINESS & OTHER AILMENTS.

"Well, I'll mix us up a batch pretty soon."

The Negro paused. "Didn't we sell an awful lot to the people last time we was to Two Forks?"

"We did indeed," Dr. Silk said. He frowned. "Obadiah, how many times have I got to tell you? There's nothing whatsoever harmful in Wonderol. If the folks think it'll cure them, it's got just as good a chance as anything else."

"Yes, sir." Obadiah tottered down the steps. "But one of these here fine days," he muttered, "we going to be running around all covered with a lot of tar and feathers, you see . . ."

Dr. Silk laughed. He walked over to the large brass-bound trunk that sat in the corner and pulled up the lid.

He began to remove things.

Colored squares of cloth came out first, transparent, weightless as gauze. These he transferred to a smaller box. Then serpentines uncoiled from the trunk; and bright gold hoops came out; and decks of cards and rubber bottles and disembodied hands and a stringless banjo that could make sweet music. Wonder followed wonder. The knife that was sharp enough to slice through wire but could not even scratch a child's soft flesh; Black Ben, the wooden bandit who could speak and sometimes did, if you asked him to, politely; the rose bush that grew on the head of a walking stick—all the miracles of Pandora's box, and more, one after another, carefully sorted and placed and made ready.

When he had finished here, Dr. Silk got a stiff brush and went to work on the black suit that hung from a hook. Dust flew and the old man cursed and then it was time for breakfast.

"Hitch up the mules, Obadiah!"

"But you ain't et."

"I'll eat on the way. Hitch 'em up!"

And they traveled, then, groaning and rattling, over the flour-soft desert. Dr. Silk fussed with his food and filled the Wonderol bottles and fussed some more; at last he could wait no longer.

He stripped off the dirty woollen trousers and checkered shirt. He stood before the jouncing mirror. He waxed his mustaches until they were as sharp and wicked and hard as scimitars.

"Easy, Obadiah, dammit. Easy!"

He climbed into the tight black suit. He put on the brocade vest, a dazzle of moss-green.

He looked again into the mirror—*Well, there you are, Doctor, and who says you aren't handsome*—and sighed.

Then, sitting up so as not to wrinkle the suit, bracing himself against the wagon wall, he fell fast asleep.

". . . the Magic Man! The Magic Man!"

"Where?"

"Right there, comin' down the street, can't you see?"

"It *is*, it's him—he's back!"

"Hey, Ma, look! Dr. Silk!"

Drowsing elders leaned forward on torn cane-backed chairs; large women turned their heads and tried to hold onto their children; all over, people came out of doors and peered through windows and stopped what they were doing.

"By God, here we go again!"

And suddenly the street was a tumult of dogs and children, yipping, yelling, running.

"Come back here, James, you listening to me?"

Everyone watched, as the familiar wagon grew larger. And thought: Has a whole year really passed? Has it?

There was Obadiah, sitting erect, expressionless, a dark gentleman with tight white hair, looking exactly as he'd looked the first time; and Dr. Silk—a monarch, an Eastern

potentate, a devil and a god—smiling mysteriously at the running people.

"Hi, when's it gonna be?" a young girl cried.

And the others: "When's the show?" "You gonna do magic for us?" "Tonight—it'll be tonight, won't it?"

Dr. Silk smiled and waited until they had crossed the town and reached the open edge; then he nodded to Obadiah and Obadiah squealed the brake blocks and scrambled down, arms filled with cardboard posters.

"Let me take a look at one of them things." One of the men in the gathering crowd came forward.

"What's it say, Mr. Fritch?"

"Tonight," the man read aloud, "at eight o'clock. Says we're all invited to attend a show given by the world's greatest—God Almighty, what's that?"

"Prestidigitator," Dr. Silk supplied. "Magician."

The man scowled, and continued. "Wonders-performed-never-before-seen-by-the-human-eye. All-new. Watch-miracles-as-they-happen. See-the-enchanted-rose-bush. See-rabbits-appear-out-of-empty-air. See-the-great-card-mystery—" The man stopped reading. "Tonight?"

"Tonight. Eight sharp."

"Hiii!" The children began to swarm over the wagon, like mad puppies.

A boy whose face was a violent explosion of brown freckles climbed up and hollered: "Hey, where you been?"

"Traveling, son."

"Like where, for instance?"

Dr. Silk jumped down and started to talk. The crowd parted and formed an aisle; grown-ups mumbled excitedly, striding off, while the children went with the Magic Man—the older, and braver, ones, those who remembered last year, by his side; the younger ones following timidly behind. Obadiah remained. When the posters were all up, he would construct the stage, in secret.

"Traveling like where?"

"Oh," Dr. Silk said, casually but loudly enough for all to hear, "like China."

"China!"

"And Paris-France, and London."

"Really?"

"How about Egypt?" called a voice from the rear: a thin, awkward child, too excited to blush.

"By all means," Dr. Silk laughed. "You don't think I'd miss Egypt, do you?"

"And Germany—was you there?"

"Oh, yes."

"Bet you never went to Africky, with all the cannibals!"

"Now that's where you're wrong, young man. Some of my best friends happen to be cannibals."

"Is your man a cannibal?"

"Obadiah? Well . . ." Dr. Silk stopped, suddenly. "I wouldn't want this to get around, but—" He stooped and turned his head in all directions, while the children held their breath. "Can you all keep a secret?"

Dozens of small heads went up and down, solemnly.

"Well, that man of mine used to be— No; I'd better not tell you."

"Tell us!"

"No. You'd get scared and run home. You'd tell your daddies and then they wouldn't let you come to the show."

"No, sir! We wouldn't say a word."

A boy not much larger than a prairie dog tugged at Dr. Silk's black trousers, and said, in a high squeaky voice:

"Honest to *God!*"

The Magic Man sighed, and squatted. He put his arms around nearby slender shoulders. "All right. Now you understand, I wouldn't tell nobody else but you . . . Well sir, that old man of mine used to be the wildest, fiercest cannibal on the whole Sandwich Island."

"The Sandwich Island? Where's that at?"

"Why, boy, don't they teach geography in the schools any more? That's in Darkest Africa, right near the Indian Ocean."

"Oh."

"We were just passing through, you see, when all of a sudden, our ship was attacked by head-hunters. It was something, all right. Anyone here present ever been attacked by headhunters?"

No one said a word.

"Seven foot tall they was and blacker than the ace of

spades, and ugly? Enough to make a body wake up in the cold sweats of a night. They'd all snuck on board without making a sound, and bust in on us. We didn't have a chance. Them devils had special swords that would slice through a stair-rail in one swipe, while we had our fists and that's all. Plus being outnumbered eleven to one. People, I'm not ashamed to say that I was nervous. Everywhere I looked, heads were flying off from folks I'd been chatting with only a few minutes before. I heard the captain start to yell. 'Git back, ye no-good heathens—' but he never finished what he was going to say, because one of the head-hunters had creeped up and lopped off his head clean as a whistle. Having no weapon, I caught it on the fly—"

"You caught *what* on the fly, Dr. Silk?" a voice quavered.

"The captain's head. Got it by the hair, you see, and started to swing. Luckily Captain Ruyker was a Dutchman, and it's a known fact that Dutchmen have heads as hard as rock. We clouted our way through six or seven of the devils, the captain and me—knocked 'em galley west—but then, when I got to the rail, I seen it was no use. I was a goner. You all know what a crocodile is?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, that ocean was just crawling with crocs. I couldn't jump in and swim for it or I'd be et in two minutes. And I couldn't turn back, either, because there they was, madder than hornets, them head-hunters, coming at me with their swords. Either way I was due to be *somebody's* dinner."

A girl in a gingham dress whispered: "Why didn't you use your magic?"

Dr. Silk shook his head. "That wouldn't have been fair," he said. "Would it?"

"I guess not," the girl sighed.

Dr. Silk straightened up, careful not to groan. A boy with round eyes and pale cheeks said: "What'd you do then?"

"Well, between crocodiles and cannibals, a smart man will always pick cannibals. That's what I did, too. 'Come on,' I told them. 'I'll fight you by twos or by threes!' But they didn't listen. Just kept coming. Then when I

closed my eyes and could almost feel that blade zipping through my neck, they surprised me. Picked me up bodily and threw me in a canoe and we paddled down the Amazon to this here place, the Sandwich Island. That's where they all lived, you see. Well, I got there and in two shakes those head-hunters had me in this pot—great big old pot, like a kettle, rusty, made of iron. My hands was tied, so I couldn't do nothing but watch while they poured in the water and threw in some apples, bunches of carrots, and about ten head of lettuce . . .”

“What were they aiming to do, Dr. Silk?”

“That's a silly question, boy.” Dr. Silk's voice sank to a dreadful murmur. “They were aiming to cook me alive.”

A girl put her hands to her lips. Some of the older boys giggled nervously and fell silent again.

Now they were all walking. The grown-ups on the porches didn't bother them because they knew Dr. Silk and they knew what he meant to the children. Secretly, a lot of them wished they could join the crowd and listen to the wonderful stories; but, of course, that would not be fitting.

Passing the Two Forks Feed and Grain Store, mincing along, barely moving at all, Dr. Silk and his parade made those with book learning think of the Pied Piper of Hamelin . . .

“What happened then, sir?”

“Well, you might know that along about now I was beginning to feel pretty low. The flames was crackling and the water was boiling and those seven-foot black demons sat hunched down on their hams, waiting. Just—waiting.”

“Did you holler?”

“Wouldn't do no good. Who'd hear me?”

“Goddy.”

“I began to sweat some then, and I could see myself all decked out on the table with an apple stuck in my mouth, when there came this eerie kind of scream. Like this”—Dr. Silk cupped his hands around his mouth and emitted a low cry, something like an owl, something like a coyote —“*Owoooo!* ‘What's that?’ I said, but they just looked sad and wouldn't answer. Then I saw over across the island, by the water, was a great big castle made out of colored rocks.”

"That's where the noise was coming from?"

"Right. And it wouldn't stop, either. *Owoooo!* *Owoooo!* Sent the cold shivers down my spine. But I seen there was no sense in my worrying about that—not with the water bubbling and boiling all around me like a stew. Finally there was nothing else left to do, except . . ."

"You magicked them!"

"Only a little. I said the magic words that made the ropes around my hands and feet vanish and in a second I was out of that pot. Say, I want you to know that I did some running then! Dripping carrots and lettuce and what-all, I kept about two feet ahead. Anyone here ever try to dodge a spear while they were running?"

No one ever had.

"It wasn't easy. I could feel them shafts whistling by my ears no more than an inch. Looked like I was done for, when one of the spears got into my shirt: it must of been tossed mighty hard, because it lifted me up off the ground and carried me right across the island like a bird. Probably would of dumped me smackdab in the ocean if I hadn't got off, too. But I did get off, and landed right at the door of the castle. Heard the screaming, then, louder than before, so I rushed in, slammed the door in the nick of time, and went to investigate."

"Was it a haunted castle?"

Dr. Silk frowned. "Boy, I could tell you it was haunted, but that would be a lie."

"Just an ordinary castle?"

"Ordinary as it could be, except for all the shrunk-up heads on the walls. Well, I went through a lot of corridors, and then, sure enough, there, laying in state, was the king of the Sandwich Island. It didn't take no more than a glance to see he was ailing with a rare tropical disease, the kind that makes your toes drop off. And holler? You'd of thought he was trying to call home a hog. And there I was. It was my opportunity to run out the back way and escape to my freedom—but I couldn't do it."

"Why not?" the freckled boy asked.

"Because of the king. You never let a man die without trying to help, do you?"

"But them head-hunters are gonna get you any second!"

"It was a risk I had to take. Moving fast, I reached into my satchel and brought out a bottle of special medicine. I could hear the door splintering, so I cracked the neck of the glass on the wall and opened the king's mouth and poured her all in. And do you know what?"

"What?"

"By the time those cannibals busted in, their ruler was setting up, well as the day he was born. Of course, that changed their attitude in a hurry. They wanted to shake my hand, but I refused, after what they had done to Captain Ruyker and my friends on the boat. Still, they said, I had to be paid back. So the king thought a spell and finally decided to give me his son for a slave."

"Obadiah?"

"None other. He's been with me ever since, and a truer friend you couldn't ask."

There was the sound of held-breath suddenly released.

"Does he ever try to—" The girl in the gingham dress still looked terrified.

Dr. Silk smiled. "It's only happened twice since that day in 1840. You may be sure I made him take back the heads and apologize. I don't think there's anything to worry about now."

Down the street, coming out of a saloon, with his arms full of posters, Obadiah stopped and grinned, widely: a crescent of glittering white shone from the dusky face. He waved.

The children shuddered.

"Well," Dr. Silk said, "you kids run along now. I'll be seeing you tonight."

"You got any new magic for us?"

"Oh, *lots* of new magic, son. You wait."

"We'll be there. We will."

The dust snowed up around all the skinny wool-wrapped legs as the children broke and scattered and ran home to count the minutes.

Dr. Silk chuckled, straightened his shoulders, and walked imperially to the Wild Silver Saloon. Its pleated batwings swung noiselessly inward, and back. He made his way to the stained oak bar and said, "Applejack, please," and began to dig for coins.

The bartender set down the glass. "On the house," he said.

"Thank you very much."

"You're the magician."

"I am."

"I seen you last year when you was in Two Forks, and the year before that." The bartender was a huge man: clumped black hair covered his arms and head, the tops of his fingers, the tip of his nose, like the pelt of a muddied coyote. It was strange to see such a man smile. Yet he smiled now, and Dr. Silk wondered for a moment how it would have been if Micah Jackson had just walked in instead of the Magic Man.

"Putting on a show tonight, are you?"

"Yes, indeed. I hope that you can come."

"I'll do that," the bartender said, "if I can get me a substitute." He went over to a thin man at the end of the bar and Dr. Silk watched and listened and forgot that there lived a lonely, withered old man named Micah Jackson, too tired to care, too old to run, ready for death to catch up.

The men in the bar had their eyes fastened on him. As they would if he were the President: more than that, though, more than mere respect. These were adults, some of them with years painted into their faces, tottering grandfathers; and still, were their eyes much different from the children's, now? He studied their eyes in the big bar mirror.

There was respect, yes; a little fear, perhaps; and love—certainly there was that, abundantly.

Why? he wondered, as he always did. Was it because he was a man who could fool them with illusions? Only because he knew how to make pigeons fly out of an ordinary hat?

He threw down the rest of the applejack and hoped this wasn't the answer. The liquid warmed a path. Perhaps, he thought, it was because he brought a little honest wonder into their lives one night out of the year . . .

Then he remembered the prairie that surrounded this small and weary town. And the applejack made him want to turn and say something to the men. You don't have to wait for me, he wanted to say. Just open your eyes:

there's magic in the air. Show me a tree, I'll show you a trick no magician alive could ever do. The dust underneath your boots is a riddle to keep you up nights: What did it used to be before it was dust? Mountains? And the sun! Hey, keep your eyes on the yellow ball—now it's there, now it isn't. Where does it go to? And why? A stone, a hill, a lake—now there's tricks that are tricks, gentlemen! There is magic for you. And I'd give a lot to figure out how they're done, yes, sir, a lot . . .

But he didn't say any of this. Instead he ordered another drink and reached over and calmly withdrew a bouquet from a small man's vest. The man jumped back and stared.

"Better shut your mouth, Jeff," the bartender said, winking, "or he'll be taking something out of it you won't want to see!"

The man closed his mouth and everybody laughed.

They gathered around, then, at this signal. "Show us another one now, come on. Give us a rabbit."

Dr. Silk vanished the bouquet and pulled a cartwheel from nowhere.

"Give us a rabbit!"

"Now, boys, I got to save something for tonight. Even magicians have to eat, you know."

"That so? I'd of thought you'd just conjure up a steak whenever you felt like it!"

"Well, that's true. But they never taste so good, somehow. Though I do remember one experience when I had no choice in the matter. It was in Russia, and I hadn't et anything but bugs for seventeen days and nights . . ."

The bartender leaned forward, wiping slowly at a thick glass mug. "You was in Russia?"

"Oh, yes," Dr. Silk said. "Got a good friend there—only man I know who can outshoot me. He once knocked the wings off a beetle at fifty paces. And—well, when things get on the dull side, I take a little trip and visit him. Of course, he's always glad to see me, since if it hadn't been for Doc Silk, he'd probably *still* be sitting on that flagpole . . ."

Every man in the bar had now joined the group. Dr. Silk looked around, took a breath, and began to talk.

He knew they would believe him. After all, how can you

doubt the word of a man who pulls roses out of the air?

Obadiah rang the bells; the crowd hushed; Dr. Silk walked through the curtained tunnel from the wagon to the stage.

He bowed gravely. A creature he was from another world, as strange in this tiny Kansas town as a comet. Oil lamps from below threw unearthly light across his face, curving the shadow of his mustaches up into the squints of his eyes. He was unreal. At any moment he might turn into a hawk or crumble into a little heap of stars or snap his fingers and change night into day.

"Ladies and gentlemen—" His voice was smooth and deep, a roar of ocean. "—and good friends!"

Far away there was the snorting of restless ponies; otherwise the town was silent, gathered here. Children sat on boxes or their fathers' shoulders: a few were squeezed as close to the platform as they could get, squirrel-eyed already, watching.

"The wonders I have brought to you tonight are here for your edification and enjoyment. They were taught to me by an East Indian princess, in exchange for saving her life. Before that eventful happenstance on the Fiji Isles, I was an ordinary man, possessed of no more powers than you . . . or you . . ." His finger jabbed out, pointing to one and then to another. ". . . or you. Then I learned the Mysteries of the Ages, and dedicated myself to bringing them to the people of the United States, my home. Later on I'll tell you all about a magic remedy that you can't get anywhere else—you all know it by now. But first: On with the show!"

And with a twist of his wrist, Dr. Silk plucked a crimson handkerchief out of the air. While the people watched, he balled the cloth into his fist, held it, and said, "Allakazam!" and shook loose *five* handkerchiefs, all knotted together, all different colors.

Applause tumbled out over the stage. Shouts and laughter and shrill little cries. Micah Jackson's body became inhabited by a demon: the demon made legs hop that could never have hopped otherwise; the old man in the black suit moved about the stage with youthful, fluid grace, prancing, bowing, skittering.

Rapidly, he pulled wonders from his sleeves. He borrowed a young cowboy's hat and broke six eggs into it and then made the eggs disappear: Presto! He showed the people two bright yellow hoops, eternally joined as the links of a chain. Strong men tried to pull the hoops apart. Clever men searched for the tiny hinges that had to be there, and weren't. Ordinary hoops? Very well. *Rickety-rack, pompety-pom!* And with a flourish, Dr. Silk separated the hoops and sent them rolling away.

The applause was guns going off now, it was horses stampeding. Dr. Silk ate it and drank it, and knew that of all the places he had ever been, Two Forks loved him most. He'd actually thought he had been slipping, losing the love that nourished him—and listen to them now!

Obadiah, looking fierce and mysterious in the light, as a head-hunter ought to look, put the miracles away with immense style. Sometimes—on times like this—the old man seemed to forget that he had joined Dr. Silk as the result of a bet: he seemed to remember far-off jungles or Arabian deserts or floating islands in the clouds. Obadiah was old, he partook of the wonder against his will.

Now Dr. Silk was crawling inside a coffin, and the eyes of the people broadened, and their fists clenched, and their breath stopped in their throats.

Obadiah's voice boomed majestically. "Will somebody from the audience kindly step up and nail down the lid?"

A farmer let friends push him onto the stage. He grinned foolishly, and winked, and put his shoulders into the hammer. The farmer went back into the crowd, full of triumph. "He's foxed now, you can wager. He's in that box for good!"

Obadiah stretched his arms and held up a lavender curtain and counted: "One! Two! Three! Four! Are you ready, Doctor?"

"Ready!"

And there was Dr. Silk, standing by the coffin, bowing.

The people stomped, shouted, yelled, thumped, while the children kept crying, "How'd you do it? Tell us how you did it!"

The miracles went on, wrapping the people of Two Forks tighter and tighter in the spell. Time ceased to exist, while rabbits hopped out of top hats and cards

flew loose like wild pigeons, only to fly back again, and chairs and tables floated on the still night air.

"Pick a card, sir. Any card."

(The pains were coming back, getting into his bones.)

"Well, I don't know—"

"Got it?"

(Hot pains, knifing. Get away!)

"Yeah, I guess so!"

"Is there—" Dr. Silk had to gasp to keep the hurting from his body "—is there any way I could have seen that card, sir?"

"Not that I know of there ain't."

"Sure about that?"

(Better now; a little better; passing.)

"Yeah."

"All right. The card you're holding . . . might it be the ace of spades?"

"God bless us, that's what it is, sure enough!"

"Thank you, sir, thank you. And now—"

The people of Two Forks listened to a speech made by a villainous looking dummy, they watched silver dollars appear from their vests, from their ears, from their hair . . .

(The pain gathered in his heart, punched, and subsided.)

"If you found it on me, dammit, then I figure it's mine!"

And all the while, the children screeching, "Please tell us! How'd you do that one, Dr. Silk? Did it really come out of nowhere? Show us how! Please!"

Finally, it was time for the last magic. Perspiring, Dr. Silk told them about the years he had spent in Ethiopia, and how the maharaja had refused absolutely and how he'd had to creep into the palace in the dead of night, at great risk to his life, in order to steal the enchanted basket.

"Is it empty, sir?"

"Empty as it can be!"

"Nothing whatever inside? Hold it up for everybody to see, please. Nothing there?"

"Nope."

"I'd like a strong man, please. A man with muscles, who knows how to throw."

"Go on, Doody! Go on."

"Ah, thank you. Now then, I want you to take this empty basket and throw it straight up into the air, as high as you can. Is that clear?"

"Just toss it up in the air, you mean?"

"That's right. Ready? One . . . two . . . three . . . Throw it, sir!"

The man threw the basket: it sailed upward. All eyes held it. Then there was an explosion, and eyes jerked back to Dr. Silk, who stood on the stage with the smoking pistol in his hand. The basket fell back to the stage, rolled, was still.

"Mr. Doody, would you care to remove the lid?"

The man poked tentatively at the basket's woven teapot lid. It fell aside.

"The Lord!"

And out of the basket shot a hundred snakes! Red ones, green ones, yellow ones—jerking, twitching serpentes, like a rainbow come suddenly apart.

Dr. Silk looked over at Obadiah, who grinned and winked and immediately hauled out the boxes of Wonderol.

The people stood smiling out as far as you could see. Bowing, Dr. Silk listened to their applause; he listened and felt the love as it cascaded over the oil lamps. And he knew it was the sweetest, most marvelous feeling that could be: he wished he could do more—something to repay them for this love which, if they knew it, kept him alive, nourished him, let the heart of Micah Jackson beat on. If he could make them see the magic around them, that would be a repayment—but how many ever saw this magic? No, he couldn't do that for the people. Yet—

"How'd you do it?" The high-voiced softly shrill question had become a chant. The children were ecstatic: "Tell us, tell us, please!"

Begging, imploring. Would he do this for them, would he, please?

Dr. Silk felt the applejack—"Mr. Jackson, if you don't cut it out, you'll be dead in a year, I promise you"—and his head seemed to dance with the children's question.

Then, all at once, he knew. He knew what he could give the people. He knew how he could say thank you and say good-by, gracefully, forever.

"All right," he called. "Gather round, now!"

"What are you gonna do? You gonna . . . show us how the magic's done? Are you?"

Dr. Silk looked at them. You know better than this, he thought, and he thought: It is because you're going to have the big tricks explained to you in a little while and you know how you'll feel and you want them to feel the same? No. It isn't. And it isn't a test, either. Or anything. Just a way to repay them.

"Yes," Dr. Silk said, "I am."

Obadiah's jaw fell. He walked over quickly. "You ain't really?" he said.

"I am. The children want it, Obadiah. I'll never be able to do anything else for them—you know that. And just look at their eyes."

"I wouldn't, Doctor, swear to the Lord."

"He's gonna show us!"

The clapping began again. Everyone pressed close, expectant, waiting.

"Don't do it," Obadiah said. "Let's just sell us some medicine like we always do and scat."

But Dr. Silk was already reaching into the black box.

He removed the enchanted hoops. "Now I want you to pay close attention," he declared.

"We will." "Shhhh!"

Carefully, then, with exaggerated simplicity, he showed how there were actually three hoops, how two of them fit together and where the third one came from.

"See?"

The children squealed incredulously and clapped their hands. Someone said, "I'll be damned, I will be damned."

"Show us more!"

Dr. Silk felt the pain again. "You want to see more?" he asked. "You really and truly do?"

"Yes!"

Obadiah grunted and sat down.

"Very well." And Dr. Silk went on to show them the magic cane, and how it wasn't magic at all. "See," he smiled, "the flowers, which ain't real, they fold up, like

this, inside the head. They're there all the time. Then I just press this here spring and it releases them. I bought it in Chicago at a warehouse . . ."

One by one, carefully, Dr. Silk explained his miracles. The deck of cards that contained nothing but aces of spades; the eggs that weren't really eggs at all; the coffin that had no bottom . . .

"Just lift it off, you see, and put it back. Just like that!"

Gradually the squealings died. The audience thinned. But the Magic Man did not notice: he could think of nothing but the love the people had given him and how he *must* repay them. So he did not feel the wrinkles jumping back into his face, or the dust of far-off places falling from his suit; or hear the way the crowd was turning quiet; or see the children's faces, with their hundred dimming lights.

When at last he had come to the enchanted basket—snakes coiled neatly in the false bottom—Dr. Silk stopped, and blinked away the wetness. "We're all magicians now," he said, his smile poised, waiting.

There were murmurs beyond the flickering of the lamps, and shufflings.

The people were silent. They looked at one another furtively, and a few giggled, while a few wore angry expressions.

Slowly, they began to disperse.

The people began to go away.

Dr. Silk felt the pain another time, more strongly than ever before: almost a new kind of pain, wrenching at his heart. He saw the boy with the freckles who had been with him this afternoon. The boy's eyes were moist. He paused, staring, then he wheeled and tore away into the shadows.

"But, I thought you wanted—" Dr. Silk saw the dark night faces clearly. No one looked back.

The bartender from the Wild Silver Saloon seemed about to say something—his face was red and embarrassed, not angry—but then he turned and walked off too.

In moments the tiny stage, the wagon, stood alone. Dr.

Silk did not move. He kept staring over the lights, just standing there, staring.

"Boss, let's go. Let's us go."

"Obadiah—" Dr. Silk took a hold of the Negro's thin shoulders. "They didn't actually believe in me, did they? Did they honestly believe I could—"

Obadiah shrugged. "Let's us get on out of here," he said. Then he began to pick up the tarnished wonders, quickly, and hurl them into the box.

"All right." Dr. Silk looked down at his hands, at the lint-flecked, worn black suit, at the cracking patent-leather shoes. "All right." He thought of the children and all their dying faces, of the men and their faces—hard and astonished and dumfounded, as if they'd just seen God come down in a dirty nightshirt, as if they'd heard God snore, and watched Him get drunk, and found that He was no different from them, and so, once more, they were left with nothing to believe in.

He felt the pain come rushing.

"Why? Lord, tell me that."

Dr. Silk went through the curtained tunnel back into the wagon and sat down on the straw pallet and sat there, quietly, and did not move even when the wagon lurched and began to sway.

After a long time, he took off the black suit, the green vest, the white shirt. He got the wax out of his mustaches.

Then he went to the window and stood there, looking out over the prairie, the moon-drenched, cool, eternal prairie, moving past him. For hours, for miles.

And while he stood there, the hurting grew; it came back into his body, piercing, hard, familiar hurting.

"Why?"

The wagon stopped.

"You feel all right now, Doctor?" Obadiah held onto the door. He looked frightened and lost.

The Magic Man studied his friend; then he snorted and leaned back and closed his eyes. He tried not to think of the people. He tried not to think of Micah Jackson asking *How's it done?* and then learning, as he would, so soon now, so very soon.

"It reminds me of the time," he said softly, "in Cal-

cutta, when I went six months without hearing the sound of a human voice . . .”

Obadiah walked over to the pallet and sat down, smiling. “I don’t recall you ever mentioned that experience to me, Dr. Silk,” he said. “Tell me about it, would you, please?”

A Classic Affair

IT TOOK HER QUITE A WHILE TO GET AROUND TO IT, BUT that's the way Ruth is, and there's nothing you can do except wait. The direct line doesn't work. I'd tried it once and she'd married Hank. So I sat there, watching her wind up, and waiting, wishing she weren't so damned pretty; it didn't make me feel much like the friend of the family I was supposed to be.

Finally I couldn't take it any more. I finished the coffee and got up and started to go. But she caught my arm and looked at me, very hard, and said, "Dave, I've got to talk to you about something." I kept quiet. "I've got to talk to you about Hank," she said.

Of course, at first I thought she was kidding. There was a time when she might have pulled such a gag; but I reminded myself that this wasn't *my* Ruth. This was Hank's, another person entirely. A housewife. Feet on the ground, eyes on the budget, not the sort to pull gags.

But even so I couldn't quite believe what she was saying. I'd been gone almost a year—the Europe thing: partly to reorient myself and get it all straight, partly as a dirty trick: Ruth and I had planned the trip together—but a year isn't very long. Not long enough, anyway, for a person to reverse his character. And yet this was apparently what had happened. Because Ruth was telling me that she and Hank were breaking up, because she had discovered that he was no longer faithful to her. It boiled down to that.

You'd have to know the guy to understand what a blast it was. I mean, I never was crazy about him, we weren't the Best Friends some people thought, but I guess I knew Hank Osterman as well as anyone did. And the biggest thing I knew was that he was just exactly what he seemed. A solid, substantial citizen. No-nonsense type. Mr. Average, in every way. Except that he loved Ruth. Almost as

much as I did, maybe; and when you feel this way about Ruth, extra-curricular activities simply don't interest you much. They couldn't.

"When did you find out?" I asked. She was getting ready for a cry, but that was all right.

"About three months ago," she said. And then she told me the whole story. It was classic stuff. How he had failed to come home on time one night, and how he had gradually turned moody and secretive, and the rest of the routine. When she came to the part where she followed him, she looked away.

I told her never mind, get on with it.

"Well . . ." She glanced at the clock; it was three-thirty. We were safe.

"Come on," I said.

She started talking to herself. "It was ten-something. He'd been fidgeting, pretending to read a magazine, but you could tell—I mean, I could. I could tell something was wrong. Always before Hank would get sleepy around this time. Now he wasn't sleepy at all. He'd turn a page and look at it, and then look up—not at anything, actually—and keep doing this until I thought I'd go insane. Then he said he was going for a walk. I asked him if he wanted company but he said no, he was nervous and had a headache and a walk all by himself would probably clear it up. So he went out. This was about the seventh or eighth time it had happened, and he'd been acting so strangely, that—"

"That you decided to see what was up."

"Yes." She faced me now.

"And what was up?"

"I followed him for around seven blocks," she said, "down to where Riverside and Alameda come together, you know. He stopped at the corner there."

She was having a hard time, so I helped her out a little. "So far nothing to get excited about."

"No? What about this, then? He went into the car lot there and looked around over his shoulder, like a—criminal. And then he got into one of the cars in the back, in the shadows, where nobody could see him."

"And?"

"How should I know?" She blew up. "Do you think I

wanted to stand there and watch the whole filthy thing?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, Dave, for heaven's sake! Am I supposed to be a child? Isn't that enough?"

I walked over to the stove—still afraid that this was all too good to be true—and got the pot and poured some more coffee. "You mean you didn't really see him meet anyone?"

"No," she said, "I didn't. I didn't have to. I mean, isn't it plain enough? Must I show you pictures or something?"

"Take it easy."

"It's a woman, all right," she said. "I don't see what else it could be except a woman, do you? He's got all the symptoms; believe me. All of them." She raised her eyes at that. "He hasn't come close to me for months," she said, and waited for it to sink in. It did.

I changed the subject in a hurry. "How many times have you gone after him?" I asked.

"Five or six."

"Always the same thing?"

"Exactly the same."

I threw down the coffee. Everything was getting too warm. I had to be careful. "I'll see what I can do," I told her.

"You won't tell him—" She came close to me. "You know what I mean."

"The soul of discretion," I said, and moved toward the back door. "Will he be there tonight, you suppose?"

She came closer. "He's there every night." I remembered the smell of her hair and the softness of her arms, suddenly, all in sharp focus, and I wanted to run.

"Dave," she said, touching my hand. "I want this thing to work. I want it to be all right between Hank and me. You grew up with him; maybe he'll tell you. Please help and make it all right."

"I'll do what I can."

She tried to give me one of those noncommittal kisses, but I managed to get out the door.

I went home and took a shower and thought about quite a number of things. About what Ruth was *really* telling me, for instance. Try to patch it up, Dave, try

your best. If it can't be done, let's talk some more. Wasn't that it?

I thought about what she had told me about Hank, and it was certainly peculiar, but it didn't make me feel bad. Not bad at all.

I parked four blocks away and looked at my watch. It was crowding ten now, and Ruth had said that would be plenty of time, so I got out and started walking toward Riverside and Alameda. The streets were pretty quiet. I walked and tried to figure things out, but they wouldn't fit together. With somebody else, maybe, but somehow not with Hank.

One thing I knew for sure: I'd play it straight. She loves the guy, I kept telling myself, and if I can fix it, I will. Yes, by God, that's what I'll do. For Ruth's sake. Then I'll go right back to being a friend of the family, old buddy-buddy Dave.

Like hell.

I'll just help Hank shake the girl—and it's a girl, all right: probably a secretary, one of the standard bits—and then I'll get out. And stay out.

Across the street I saw him. There couldn't be any mistake: cheap suit, stooped shoulders, that old man's walk he'd had even as a kid.

"Hey, Hank!"

He whipped around and blinked until I was close enough for him to make me out, then he smiled and stuck his hand forward. He'd looked bad the one night I'd spent over at his house last week, the welcome home party, but now he looked worse.

"What are you doing around here?" he asked.

I told him. "Looking for you." Then I said, "Hank, I want to talk with you. Let's grab a drink."

He shook his head. "No, thanks. I'd rather not, not this time, anyway." He kept glancing over his shoulder at the corner, nervously; it was pretty obvious.

I let him have both barrels. "I saw Ruth this afternoon."

"Oh?" It didn't register.

"She called me up. That's why I came over while you were at work."

He nodded, but I could see it still hadn't penetrated.

"Look, Hank," I said, "we've been friends for about fifteen years. I guess we can talk to each other by now. Can't we?"

"Why, of course," he said. "I mean, hell yes, of course. But—couldn't we make it tomorrow, Dave? For lunch, maybe?"

He was headed down the street for the corner. I got his sleeve. "Why? Do you have a pressing engagement?"

"So to speak, Dave. That is, I do have something on."

I walked in front of him. "Ruth told me a story," I said. "Now I'd like to hear your version of it."

"What?" For the first time he seemed to come out of it. His eyes lost that glassy look. "What do you mean?"

"You want to discuss it here, in the middle of the street?"

"Yes," he said. "Here in the middle of the street will be just fine."

I told him everything that Ruth had told me. He listened intently, never interrupting.

When it was over, he smiled.

"Well?" I was getting a little sore.

"I'm afraid it's true," he said. "I *have* been unfaithful to Ruth."

The urge to swing on him passed, and I found myself feeling confused. "She's waiting for you now, I suppose?"

He nodded. "She waits every night for me."

All I could say was, "Who is she?"

"Come along," he said, "I'll introduce you."

I said no, of course, but he insisted, so I followed him to the corner, still not completely able to accept things.

Hank turned, then, and started into the lot. It was dark, no strings of bulbs, no flashy Christmas-tree come-ons, just a dark place with a lot of parked cars that you couldn't see very well.

"Do you remember this?" he asked softly. "It's really amazing. We used to pass it every day—hundreds of times. And never gave it a second look."

I adjusted my eyes to the blackness. The cars, I saw, were antique models mostly; big square boats, the kind you see in Chaplin and Fields revivals. Reos and Auburns and old Lincolns, I guessed. Over the salesman's shack

a sign read: SPRINGFIELD'S VINTAGE AUTOMOBILES.

Well, it was an original trysting-spot, anyway.

Hank pulled me along, past all the ancient crates. Some of them were orange with rust, nothing but heaps of rotten metal, twenty and thirty years old. A few didn't seem to be anything but shells.

He stopped by the tiny wooden house, and grinned. Then he leaned against one of the boats. "You still want the introduction?"

I nodded. Why not? I was this far already. Sure, trot her out and we'll all have a nice sticky scene.

He stepped back. By this time I could see perfectly. "All right, then," he said. "Come over here."

I did. He walked around and opened the door of the car. "David, please meet Miss Duesenberg. Miss Duesenberg, my good friend David Jenkinson."

I looked inside the car.

It was empty.

"You understand?" Hank said.

I said "No," and I never spoke a truer word.

He was staring at the car now. I'd tried to light a cigarette, but he'd knocked it out of my hand, explaining that there might be police around. We stood quietly.

"No woman?" I said.

He shook his head. "No woman." He wasn't touching the car, or leaning against it; just staring. It was a huge thing. Dark-blue or black, it looked something like a Rolls-Royce, I thought, only sportier. There was just room for two in it, or at the outside three. I couldn't tell much else. A big convertible, around twenty years old.

"Let's go somewhere and talk," I said, almost in a whisper.

"I can't," he said. "I've got to stay here, Dave. Look." He opened the door again. "Look at this leather. Smell it. It's top grain, you can't get any better. Feel how soft it is, and rich. Go on."

I ran my hand over the seat. It was good leather, all right.

"Now think of what one kid with a pocketknife could do to that," Hank said. "I mean, you know what kids are. They slash the seats in theatres, in drug stores, you

know that. I don't know why. But they do, and think of what would happen if one of them found out about *this* . . ." His voice turned angry and hard. "And these fools won't lock it!" He glared in the direction of the shack, and swallowed. "I know, you're going to tell me that I ought to bring it to their attention. I almost did, believe it or not. But then I thought, if it's locked, I won't ever be able to sit in it. I don't know."

"Hank," I said, "let's go somewhere. I really think we'd better do that."

"I just told you, I *can't*. If you want to talk, do it here."

I was going to argue, but I could tell from his tone that it wouldn't do any good. "Okay."

"Not outside, though," he said. "Here."

I got into the car; Hank settled himself beside me and closed the door.

"By the way, I want you to notice the wheel," he said. "Leather-covered. Horn button, too. And take ahold of that emergency."

It was all chromed, longer than the gearshift; something you'd expect to find aboard a steamship.

Hank was smiling again. He pointed to a small lever on the dash—there were dozens of them. "This gadget is your brake adjustment," he murmured. "See? You can adjust the brakes for any road condition, no matter what. This here is the altimeter. Tells you how high up you are. And this little thing—"

"Hey."

He stopped talking. After a bit he sighed and turned toward me. "I can't explain, Dave," he said. "I've fallen in love with a car, that's all. I can't explain."

"Give it a try."

"No use. It's something that's happened. I can tell you how, how's easy; but not why."

"That's good enough."

He leaned back and closed his eyes. "Well—I was coming home from work. I guess it must be almost three months ago. The bus went down Riverside, as usual. I was looking out the window. When we passed Springfield's, I glanced in at the old cars, and—well, I saw it."

"You saw this car."

"That's right. The sun was still fairly high, and it sort of glittered off the paint, and I remember thinking at the time, My God, you know, what a fine looking piece of machinery. Didn't think much about it, of course. But the funny thing is, I kept seeing it, even after the bus had passed. At home I still saw it, that quick flash of dark blue . . ." He got lost in his remembering. But I wasn't about to interrupt. "It wouldn't go away, Dave. The next day when the bus passed, I stopped and got out and walked back. I stood around the lot for a long time, looking in at the car—I mean, I didn't even know what kind it was!—and I felt something happening. You used to say it happened to you: kind of hurting, the way you feel when you see a beautiful girl that you don't really want, but you do, too. With you it was paintings and plays and things like that. But, God this was the first time for me, and I couldn't understand what was wrong!"

"Go on."

"There isn't much more," he said. "I came back the next day and asked the dealer what it was and he told me, a Duesenberg. That night I decided to take another look; at the engine. He wouldn't let me see it, you know. The lot was closed. It was sitting alone, two big Mercedes-Benz jobs on either side. For the first time I examined it closely. I touched it, and saw how wonderful it was."

Now he was going. Talking more than I'd ever heard him do, he told me how he'd worked up the nerve to try the door. How he'd sweated over the decision: To get in or not to get in. How he had then gone to libraries and book stores and read everything he could get ahold of pertaining to the car.

"It was an astonishing thing," he said, "really and truly astonishing." His eyes were lit, and I think he was trembling; maybe not. "The facts—Dave, listen. This automobile, the one you're in now, how fast would you say it goes?"

"Hell," I said. "I don't know anything about cars."

"Take a guess. Go on."

"Seventy?"

"Seventy?" He chuckled. "Dave, this automobile will turn an honest one-thirty. One hundred and thirty miles

per hour. But that's not it, of course," he said, hurriedly. "I mean, a lot of cars will go fast."

"Then what is it?"

"Everything," he said, helplessly. "The way it looks so goddamn regal and efficient and luxurious, and—the way it's put together. That Augie Duesenberg, you know, he didn't fool around. I mean, this car isn't one of your assembly line jobs like they have nowadays. It just isn't, Dave. Like—well, you remember that house we looked at on Benedict Canyon, the big stone one that you said it looked like it had its feet planted in the ground right up to its knees? You remember that house?"

"Yeah."

"This is the same. The same exactly. It's a work of art, Dave; I'm telling you!" His voice got a little louder. "This guy Briggs Cunningham, he goes around saying he wants to be the first American car to win at Le Mans—he's nuts. An American car won Le Mans. The French G. P., anyway. Which American car? The Duesenberg. Yes, and, listen, the tolerances on the engine are still just as fine as any of your European makes. Hell, they didn't have anything else but Duesie powerplants at Indianapolis! Not for years! God, Dave, you know what they did? They had this one man, a mechanic. He was an artist. Responsible for the whole engine, just him. They'd finish the car and take it out on the track and run it at top speed for twenty-four hours or something. Then they'd take it back in and this mechanic, he'd take it apart and see if anything was worn. If it wasn't absolutely perfect, he'd start all over again. I mean, that's something that's gone, it's gone forever, I'm telling you. And—I suppose I sound like an advertisement?"

"A little."

"Well, never mind. It's all true." He opened the door. "Look here: three hinges. Or there, the running board. Get out for a minute."

He had me bang my fist on the fender. It was hard and solid. Then he started showing me other things: the tail-lights, the gigantic wheels with their special tires, the rumbleseat. There wasn't anything for me to do but follow him around and wait it out.

"Shall we take a peek at the engine?"

We took a peek.

"Four hundred horses, Dave. A '29, remember."

He must have talked for hours, showing me every square inch of the car, giving me a complete history. I could see that it was for real, however fantastic it might seem. Old gray Hank had flipped his wig over an auto, and since people like Hank usually live out their whole lives without flipping their wigs over anything, he was taking it hard.

"I may be insane," he said, "but there's nothing to be done about it. I'm telling you, when I'm away from the car, I'm—in hell. I keep thinking of what might happen to it, just sitting here, unlocked at night. I keep dreading the day when somebody buys it. Some ape, some fat cigar-smoking ape without the sense to know what he's got . . . Here it is, the finest automobile ever built, the absolute best of them all. Sitting here." His fists were clenched tightly. "I want you to know this, if some idiot comes in here and buys it, I'll kill him. So help me God, that's what I'll do."

I let him calm down, then I said, "Hank, listen. If you're so nuts about the car, if it means all this to you, why don't you buy the damn thing and get it over with? Why all this creeping around at night, why such a big deal?"

He laughed, the coldest laugh I think I've ever heard. "That's a real brainstorm," he said. "Now why didn't I think of that? Just go ahead and buy it . . ."

"Well, you want it, don't you?"

"Of course I want it. Unfortunately I don't have seven thousand, five hundred dollars, which is the price. I don't even have five hundred dollars."

We sat still for a while. The idea I'd been fighting off broke through finally, and when it did, I opened the door and got out of the car.

"You don't understand, do you?" he said.

I told him yes, I thought I did.

"Then you see why I haven't told Ruth. What could I tell her—that I'm in love with a car?"

"No, you couldn't do that."

"Besides," he said, "she's a woman."

I thought, yes, she is, she is that. A beautiful and

desirable woman, and I'm in love with her. Not with a hunk of machinery . . .

I walked to the edge of the lot. Then, almost scared, I started back. I knew that if I thought much about it, I wouldn't do it. And it was the only real chance I'd seen.

"What's your plan?" I asked him.

"I don't have any," he said.

"Think it'll wear off?"

"Maybe. I don't know, I've never been through anything like this before. Do you think I ought to see a doctor?"

"No," I said. "You'd spend two hundred dollars just to learn that you've got a fixation on a car. I've got fixations, too. Who doesn't?" I took a deep breath. "Hank, how badly do you want this boat, anyway?"

He didn't answer.

"I'm serious. Tell me exactly what it would mean to you."

"To own it?"

"That's right."

His hands gripped the steering wheel. You could see that he wasn't really considering the question. It was too much for him.

"What I mean is, to know that it was completely yours. Hank Osterman's own car. To know that you could keep it in the garage and work on it whenever you wanted to and shine it up every morning." I gave the knife a twist. "Or drive it whenever you got the urge. Maybe early in the morning . . ." I remembered how Hank liked five o'clock. "You know, take it out and really wind it up. Wait for one of the new bombs, idle him along, and then let him see what you have."

"Stop it."

"Or tool it downtown and park it, just to let everybody have a look."

"Dave, goddamn it, shut up. I want that more than anything else in the world. I told you, didn't I?"

"More than *anything* else?"

"Yes!"

"That's all I wanted to know," I said.

I left him sitting in the car.

I had a rough time with the loan, but there are ways. People like Hank don't know that. If I'd asked for five hundred they'd have tossed me out on my ear; getting eight thousand was a different story.

Once I knew it was set up, I called Ruth and told her to be patient, everything was going to be all right. When she told me that nothing had changed, I let her know she was wrong. Things would be changing very soon.

It was pretty close to perfect.

I'd buy the car while Hank was at work. Then I'd drive it over and catch him as he broke for lunch. Let him take the wheel for a few blocks—to get the feel of it. Sink the hook good and deep.

Then make him the deal.

"It's yours, Hank, old scout. All yours. There's only one little thing I'd like in return—really not very much at all, considering. In exchange for the car—this one here, the one you said you'd give anything for—I'd like Ruth. Fair enough?"

Oh, yes. It would work, too: I knew that. It would work. Of course, he'd come to his senses eventually, but then it'd be too late. Ruth and I would be long ago and far away . . .

The money came from the bank last Monday, a week ago. I'd been giving Ruth a good stall and managed to keep her quiet, so I knew that conditions were ripe.

I was at Springfield's when they opened. The salesman, a short man with a mustache and an accent, just about fainted when he saw he had a live one. "The Duesenberg? Oh, yes, sir; a genuine classic, indeed. Tyrone Power had one quite a bit like it, you know, but not in anything like this condition. The engine's been completely overhauled, only five hundred miles on it, and those are all new tires. New paint—the original color, by the way . . ."

I offered him six grand, and he gobbled it up. Then he told me how to work the gears, and I had to listen to a story about the Duesenberg Owner's Club and what rare taste I had and all like that.

While he spieled, I glanced over at the car. The paint glistened, because of the sun; it was a rich, dark blue. I hadn't actually seen the thing before, and you had to

admit it was a handsome job. Every part of it seemed to be made of cast iron. There was a lot of chrome, but somehow it managed to look good, for once, not gaudy and useless.

I thought of Hank, suddenly, of his sneaking around at night, peeping at the car, worrying over it, scared that someone might hurt it. He really must love the old heap. Maybe I'm not kidding myself after all, I thought, maybe *I am* doing him a favor!

Finally I was permitted to get in and start it up. It caught right away. The engine began to pulse smoothly but with a power you could feel. The salesman was smiling. "Be very careful," he said. "You've got a thoroughbred under you."

I waved at him and put it in gear and touched the accelerator pedal.

The car lunged forward like a mad thing. Low in the seat—you're like a midget in that cab, it's so big—I pressed the brake, fast.

"See what I mean?" the salesman said.

I nodded, and took off more cautiously. I'd been driving for years, but now I was a beginner again, trying to keep the whole works from running away with me.

When I finally got it out on the highway, just for fun I fed it a little more gas. The engine took on a different pitch, there was a surge, and I saw by the speedometer that I was travelling almost seventy! It told you plainly that you had a long way to go before you strained *this* baby.

Poor old Hank, I thought: God, he's in love with it and he hasn't even driven it yet. Just wait'll he gets behind the wheel and sees what it will do.

Out toward the valley a couple of hot-rods got smart. Cut down Fords, I think they were. They tooted and roared past, dribbling exhaust. I floored the Duesenberg, and, believe me, before I even started thinking about third those boys were out of sight behind me.

It was a hell of a feeling.

I'd planned, of course, to take the car over to Hank's office that afternoon. It was all rehearsed and ready to go.

But I was miles away, headed for open highway. The

salesman had said something about suspension, and I wanted to try a few curves—nothing fancy or anything. And besides, that evening would do just as well. There wasn't any rush about it. Just a few curves and a straight run, to see how the old bus behaved.

That was a week ago. Since then I've taken the Duesie over the ridge route, along Highway One—you know what that is—and into Beverly Hills, for kicks. Parked it across from Romanoff's, where the boys in their new Detroit tubs could get a nice long look. And then over to the Derby—and wasn't that fine, though. I mean, I'd spent a couple of hours getting it all shined up, and I felt like a damn king there, a regular damn king.

Hank's probably going crazy—I went back and told the salesman not to give out any information—but then, he'll have it for a long time to come, won't he?

Meanwhile, I figure why not enjoy it a little. It really is a work of art. You're always discovering strange new things about it, hidden compartments, extra switches and levers and buttons. God knows what they're all for. It's for sure they're for something, though. That's the kind of car it is.

I'll probably turn it over to Hank some time next week, before he goes berserk, and then Ruth and I will take up where we left off.

But first I would like to see if the Duesie actually does an honest hundred and thirty mph.

I wouldn't be a bit surprised if it did.

I mean, it's a hell of a car.

The Hunger

NOW, WITH THE SUN ALMOST GONE, THE SKY LOOKED wounded—as if a gigantic razor had been drawn across it, slicing deep. It bled richly. And the wind, which came down from High Mountain, cool as rain, sounded a little like children crying: a soft, unhappy kind of sound, rising and falling.

Afraid, somehow, it seemed to Julia. Terribly afraid.

She quickened her step. I'm an idiot, she thought, looking away from the sky. A complete idiot. That's why I'm frightened now; and if anything happens—which it won't, and can't—then I'll have no one to blame but myself.

She shifted the bag of groceries to her other arm and turned slightly. There was no one in sight, except old Mr. Hannaford, pulling in his newspaper stands, preparing to close up the drugstore, and Jake Spiker, barely moving across to the Blue Haven for a glass of beer: no one else. The rippling red brick streets were silent.

But even if she got nearly all the way home, she could scream and someone would hear her. Who would be fool enough to try anything right out in the open? Not even a lunatic. Besides, it wasn't dark yet, not technically, anyway.

Still, as she passed the vacant lots, all shoulder-high in wild grass, Julia could not help thinking, He might be hiding there, right now. It was possible. Hiding there, all crouched up, waiting. And he'd only have to grab her, and—she wouldn't scream. She knew that suddenly, and the thought terrified her. Sometimes you *can't* scream. . . .

If only she'd not bothered to get that spool of yellow thread over at Younger's, it would be bright daylight now, bright clear daylight. And—

Nonsense! This was the middle of the town. She was

surrounded by houses full of people. People all around. Everywhere.

(He was a hunger; a need; a force. Dark emptiness filled him. He moved, when he moved, like a leaf caught in some dark and secret river, rushing. But mostly he slept now, an animal, always ready to wake and leap and be gone . . .)

The shadows came to life, dancing where Julia walked. Now the sky was ugly and festered, and the wind had become stronger, colder. She clicked along the sidewalk, looking straight ahead, wondering, Why, why am I so infernally stupid? What's the matter with me?

Then she was home, and it was all over. The trip had taken not more than half an hour. And here was Maud, running. Julia felt her sister's arms fly around her, hugging. "God, my God."

And Louise's voice: "We were just about to call Mick to go after you."

Julia pulled free and went into the kitchen and put down the bag of groceries.

"Where in the world have you been?" Maud demanded.

"I had to get something at Younger's." Julia took off her coat. "They had to go look for it, and—I didn't keep track of the time."

Maud shook her head. "Well, I don't know," she said, wearily. "You're just lucky you're alive, that's all."

"Now—"

"You listen! He's out there somewhere. Don't you understand that? It's a fact. They haven't even come close to catching him yet."

"They will," Julia said, not knowing why: she wasn't entirely convinced of it.

"Of course they will. Meantime, how many more is he going to murder? Can you answer me that?"

"I'm going to put my coat away." Julia brushed past her sister. Then she turned and said, "I'm sorry you were worried. It won't happen again." She went to the closet, feeling strangely upset. They would talk about it tonight. All night. Analyzing, hinting, questioning. They would talk of nothing else, as from the very first. And they would not be able to conceal their delight.

"Wasn't it awful about poor Eva Schillings?"

No, Julia had thought: from her sisters' point of view it was not awful at all. It was wonderful. It was priceless.

It was news.

Julia's sisters . . . Sometimes she thought of them as mice. Giant gray mice, in high white collars: groaning a little, panting a little, working about the house. Endlessly, untiringly: they would squint at pictures, knock them crooked, then straighten them again; they swept invisible dust from clean carpets and took the invisible dust outside in shining pans and dumped it carefully into spotless apple-baskets; they stood by beds whose sheets shone gleaming white and tight, and clucked in soft disgust, and replaced the sheets with others. All day, every day, from six in the morning until most definite dusk. Never questioning, never doubting that the work had to be done.

They ran like arteries through the old house, keeping it alive. For it had become now a part of them, and they part of it—like the handcrank mahogany Victrola in the hall, or the lion-pelted sofa, or the Boutelle piano (ten years silent, its keys yellowed and decayed and ferocious, like the teeth of an aged mule).

Nights, they spoke of sin. Also of other times and better days: Maud and Louise—sitting there in the bellying heat of the obsolete but steadfast stove, hooking rugs, crocheting doilies, sewing linen, chatting, chatting.

Occasionally Julia listened, because she was there and there was nothing else to do; but mostly she didn't. It had become a simple thing to rock and nod and think of nothing at all, while *they* traded dreams of dead husbands, constantly relishing their mutual widowhood—relishing it!—pitching these fragile ghosts into moral combat. "Ernie, God rest him, was an honorable man." (So were they all, Julia would think, all honorable men; but we are here to praise Caesar, not to bury him . . .) "Jack would be alive today if it hadn't been for that trunk lid slamming down on his head: that's what started it all." Poor Ernie! Poor Jack!

(He walked along the railroad tracks, blending with the night. He could have been young, or old: an age-hiding beard dirtied his face and throat. He wore a blue

sweater, ripped in a dozen places. On the front of the sweater was sewn a large felt letter: E. Also sewn there was a small design showing a football and calipers. His gray trousers were dark with stain where he had fouled them. He walked along the tracks, seeing and not seeing the pulse of light far ahead; thinking and not thinking, Perhaps I'll find it there, Perhaps they won't catch me, Perhaps I won't be hungry any more . . .)

"You forgot the margarine," Louise said, holding the large sack upside down.

"Did I? I'm sorry." Julia took her place at the table. The food immediately began to make her ill: the sight of it, the smell of it. Great bowls of beans, crisp-skinned chunks of turkey, mashed potatoes. She put some on her plate, and watched her sisters. They ate earnestly; and now, for no reason, this, too, was upsetting.

She looked away. What was it? What was wrong?

"Mick says that fellow didn't die," Maud announced. "Julia—"

"What fellow?"

"At the asylum, that got choked. He's going to be all right."

"That's good."

Louise broke a square of toast. She addressed Maud: "What else did he say, when you talked to him? Are they making any progress?"

"Some. I understand there's a bunch of police coming down from Seattle. If they don't get him in a few days, they'll bring in some bloodhounds from out-of-state. Of course, you can imagine how much Mick likes *that!*"

"Well, it's his own fault. If he was any kind of a sheriff, he'd of caught that fellow a long time before this. I mean, after all, Burlington just isn't that big." Louise dismembered a turkey leg, ripped little shreds of the meat off, put them into her mouth.

Maud shook her head. "I don't know. Mick claims it isn't like catching an ordinary criminal. With this one, you never can guess what he's going to do, or where he'll be. Nobody has figured out how he stays alive, for instance."

"Probably," Louise said, "he eats bugs and things."

Julia folded her napkin quickly and pressed it onto the table.

Maud said, "No. Most likely he finds stray dogs and cats."

They finished the meal in silence. Not, Julia knew, because there was any lull in thought: merely so the rest could be savored in the living room, next to the fire. A proper place for everything.

They moved out of the kitchen. Louise insisted on doing the dishes, while Maud settled at the radio and tried to find a local news broadcast. Finally she snapped the radio off, angrily. "You'd think they'd at least keep us informed! Isn't that the least they could do?"

Louise materialized in her favorite chair. The kitchen was dark. The stove warmed noisily, its metal sides undulating.

And it was time.

"Where do you suppose he is right now?" Maud asked.

Louise shrugged. "Out there somewhere. If they'd got him, Mick would of called us. He's out there somewhere."

"Yes. Laughing at all of us, too, I'll wager. Trying to figure out who'll be next."

Julia sat in the rocker and tried not to listen. Outside, there was a wind. A cold wind, biting; the kind that slips right through window putty, that you can feel on the glass. Was there ever such a cold wind? she wondered.

Then Louise's words started to echo. "He's out there somewhere. . . ."

Julia looked away from the window, and attempted to take an interest in the lacework in her lap.

Louise was talking. Her fingers flashed long silver needles. ". . . spoke to Mrs. Schillings today."

"I don't want to hear about it." Maud's eyes flashed like the needles.

"God love her heart, she's about crazy. Could barely talk."

"God, God."

"I tried to comfort her, of course, but it didn't do any good."

Julia was glad she had been spared that conversation. It sent a shudder across her, even to think about it. Mrs. Schillings was Eva's mother, and Eva—only

seventeen . . . The thoughts she vowed not to think, came back. She remembered Mick's description of the body, and his words: ". . . she'd got through with work over at the telephone office around about nine. Carl Jasperson offered to see her home, but he says she said not to bother, it was only a few blocks. Our boy must have been hiding around the other side of the cannery. Just as Eva passed, he jumped. Raped her and then strangled her. I figure he's a pretty man-sized bugger. Thumbs like to went clean through the throat. . . ."

In two weeks, three women had died. First, Charlotte Adams, the librarian. She had been taking her usual shortcut across the school playground, about 9:15 P.M. They found her by the slide, her clothes ripped from her body, her throat raw and bruised.

Julia tried very hard not to think of it, but when her mind would clear, there were her sisters' voices, droning, pulling her back, deeper.

She remembered how the town had reacted. It was the first murder Burlington had had in fifteen years. It was the very first mystery. Who was the sex-crazed killer? Who could have done this terrible thing to Charlotte Adams? One of her gentleman friends, perhaps. Or a hobo, from one of the nearby jungles. Or . . .

Mick Daniels and his tiny force of deputies had swung into action immediately. Everyone in town took up the topic, chewed it, talked it, chewed it, until it lost its shape completely. The air became electrically charged. And a grim gaiety swept Burlington, reminding Julia of a circus where everyone is forbidden to smile.

Days passed, uneventfully. Vagrants were pulled in and released. People were questioned. A few were booked, temporarily.

Then, when the hum of it had begun to die, it happened again. Mrs. Dovie Samuelson, member of the local P.T.A., mother of two, moderately attractive and moderately young, was found in her garden, sprawled across a rhododendron bush, dead. She was naked, and it was established that she had been attacked. Of the killer, once again, there was no trace.

Then the State Hospital for the Criminally Insane released the information that one of its inmates—a Robert

Oakes—had escaped. Mick, and many others, had known this all along. Oakes had originally been placed in the asylum on a charge of raping and murdering his cousin, a girl named Patsy Blair.

After he had broken into his former home and stolen some old school clothes, he had disappeared, totally.

Now he was loose.

Burlington, population 3,000, went into a state of ecstasy: delicious fear gripped the town. The men foraged out at night with torches and weapons; the women squeaked and looked under their beds and . . . chatted.

But still no progress was made. The maniac eluded hundreds of searchers. They knew he was near, perhaps at times only a few feet away, hidden; but always they returned home, defeated.

They looked in the forests and in the fields and along the river banks. They covered High Mountain—a miniature hill at the south end of town—like ants, poking at every clump of brush, investigating every abandoned tunnel and water tank. They broke into deserted houses, searched barns, silos, haystacks, treetops. They looked everywhere, everywhere. And found nothing.

When they decided for sure that their killer had gone far away, that he couldn't conceivably be within fifty miles of Burlington, a third crime was committed. Young Eva Schillings' body had been found, less than a hundred yards from her home.

And that was three days ago. . . .

" . . . they get him," Louise was saying, "they ought to kill him by little pieces, for what he's done."

Maud nodded. "Yes; but they won't."

"Of course they—"

"No! You wait. They'll shake his hand and lead him back to the bughouse and wait on him hand and foot—till he gets a notion to bust out again."

"Well, I'm of a mind the people will have something to say about that."

"Anyway," Maud continued, never lifting her eyes from her knitting, "what makes you so sure they *will* catch him? Supposing he just drops out of sight for six months, and—"

"You stop that! They'll get him. Even if he is a maniac, he's still human."

"I really doubt that. I doubt that a human could have done these awful things." Maud sniffed. Suddenly, like small rivers, tears began to course down her snowbound cheeks, cutting and melting the hard white-packed powder, revealing flesh underneath even paler. Her hair was shot with gray, and her dress was the color of rocks and moths; yet, she did not succeed in looking either old or frail. There was nothing whatever frail about Maud.

"He's a man," she said. Her lips seemed to curl at the word. Louise nodded, and they were quiet.

(His ragged tennis shoes padded softly on the gravel bed. Now his heart was trying to tear loose from his chest. The men, the men . . . They had almost stepped on him, they were that close. But he had been silent. They had gone past him, and away. He could see their flares back in the distance. And far ahead, the pulsing light. Also a square building: the depot, yes. He must be careful. He must walk in the shadows. He must be very still.

The fury burned him, and he fought it.

Soon.

It would be all right, soon . . .)

". . . think about it, this here maniac is only doing what every man would like to do but can't."

"Maud!"

"I mean it. It's a man's natural instinct—it's all they ever think about." Maud smiled. She looked up. "Julia, you're feeling sick. Don't tell me you're not."

"I'm all right," Julia said, tightening her grip on the chair-arms slightly. She thought, they've been married! They talk this way about men, as they always have, and yet soft words have been spoken to them, and strong arms placed around their shoulders. . . .

Maud made tiny circles with her fingers. "Well, I can't force you to take care of yourself. Except, when you land in the hospital again, I suppose you know who'll be doing the worrying and staying up nights—as per usual."

"I'll . . . go on to bed in a minute." But, why was she hesitating? Didn't she want to be alone?

Why didn't she want to be alone?

Louise was testing the door. She rattled the knob vigorously, and returned to her chair.

"What would he want, anyway," Maud said, "with two old biddies like us?"

"We're not so old," Louise said, saying, actually: "That's true; we're old."

But it wasn't true, not at all. Looking at them, studying them, it suddenly occurred to Julia that her sisters were ashamed of their essential attractiveness. Beneath the 'twenties hair-dos, the ill-used cosmetics, the ancient dresses (which did not quite succeed in concealing their still voluptuous physiques), Maud and Louise were youthfully full and pretty. They were. Not even the birch-twigg toothbrushes and traditional snuff could hide it.

Yet, Julia thought, they envy me.

They envy my plainness.

"What kind of a man would do such heinous things?" Louise said, pronouncing the word, carefully, heen-ious.

And Julia, without calling or forming the thought, discovered an answer grown in her mind: an impression, a feeling.

What kind of a man?

A lonely man.

It came upon her like a chill. She rose from the pil-
lowed chair, lightly. "I think," she said, "I'll go on to my room."

"Are your windows good and locked?"

"Yes."

"You'd better make sure. All he'd have to do is climb up the drainpipe." Maud's expression was peculiar. Was she really saying, "This is only to comfort you, dear. Of the three of us, it's unlikely he'd pick on you?"

"I'll make sure." Julia walked to the hallway. "Good night."

"Try to get some sleep." Louise smiled. "And don't think about him, hear? We're perfectly safe. He couldn't possibly get in, even if he tried. Besides," she said, "I'll be awake."

(He stopped and leaned against a pole and looked up at the deaf and swollen sky. It was a movement of dark shapes, a hurrying, a running.)

He closed his eyes.

*"The moon is the shepherd,
The clouds are his sheep . . ."*

He tried to hold the words, tried very hard, but they scattered and were gone.

"No."

He pushed away from the pole, turned, and walked back to the gravel bed.

The hunger grew: with every step it grew. He thought that it had died, that he had killed it at last and now he could rest, but it had not died. It sat inside him, inside his mind, gnawing, calling, howling to be released. Stronger than before. Stronger than ever before.

"The moon is the shepherd . . ."

A cold wind raced across the surrounding fields of wild grass, turning the land into a heaving dark-green ocean. It sighed up through the branches of cherry trees and rattled the thick leaves. Sometimes a cherry would break loose, tumble in the gale, fall and split, filling the night with its fragrance. The air was iron and loam and growth.

He walked and tried to pull these things into his lungs, the silence and coolness of them.

But someone was screaming, deep inside him. Someone was talking.

"What are you going to do—"

He balled his fingers into fists.

"Get away from me! Get away!"

"Don't—"

The scream faded.

The girl's face remained. Her lips and her smooth white skin and her eyes, her eyes . . .

He shook the vision away.

The hunger continued to grow. It wrapped his body in sheets of living fire. It got inside his mind and bubbled in hot acids, filling and filling him.

He stumbled, fell, plunged his hands deep into the gravel, withdrew fists full of the grit and sharp stones

and squeezed them until blood trailed down his wrists.

He groaned, softly.

*Ahead, the light glowed and pulsed and whispered,
Here, Here, Here, Here, Here.*

*He dropped the stones and opened his mouth to the
wind and walked on . . .)*

Julia closed the door and slipped the lock noiselessly. She could no longer hear the drone of voices: it was quiet, still, but for the sighing breeze.

What kind of a man . . .

She did not move, waiting for her heart to stop throbbing. But it would not stop.

She went to the bed and sat down. Her eyes traveled to the window, held there.

"He's out there somewhere . . ."

Julia felt her hands move along her dress. It was an old dress, once purple, now gray with faded gray flowers. The cloth was tissue-thin. Her fingers touched it and moved upward to her throat. They undid the top button.

For some reason, her body trembled. The chill had turned to heat, tiny needles of heat, puncturing her all over.

She threw the dress over a chair and removed the underclothing. Then she walked to the bureau and took from the top drawer a flannel nightdress, and turned.

What she saw in the tall mirror caused her to stop and make a small sound.

Julia Landon stared back at her from the polished glass.

Julia Landon, thirty-eight, neither young nor old, attractive nor unattractive, a woman so plain she was almost invisible. All angles and sharpnesses, and flesh that would once have been called "milky" but was now only white, pale white. A little too tall. A little too thin. And faded.

Only the eyes had softness. Only the eyes burned with life and youth and—

Julia moved away from the mirror. She snapped off the light. She touched the window shade, pulled it slightly, guided it soundlessly upward.

Then she unfastened the window latch.

Night came into the room and filled it. Outside, giant

clouds roved across the moon, obscuring it, revealing it, obscuring it again.

It was cold. Soon there would be rain.

Julia looked out beyond the yard, in the direction of the depot, dark and silent now, and the tracks and the jungles beyond the tracks where lost people lived.

"I wonder if he can see me."

She thought of the man who had brought terror and excitement to the town. She thought of him openly, for the first time, trying to imagine his features.

He was probably miles away.

Or, perhaps he was nearby. Behind the tree, there, or under the hedge. . . .

"I'm afraid of you, Robert Oakes," she whispered to the night. "You're insane, and a killer. You would frighten the wits out of me."

The fresh smell swept into Julia's mind. She wished she were surrounded by it, in it, just for a little while.

Just for a few minutes.

A walk. A short walk in the evening.

She felt the urge strengthening.

"You're dirty, young man. And heartless—ask Mick, if you don't believe me. You want love so badly you must kill for it—but nevertheless, you're heartless. Understand? And you're not terribly bright, either, they say. Have you read Shakespeare's Sonnets? Herrick? How about Shelley, then? There, you see! I'd detest you on sight. Just look at your fingernails!"

She said these things silently, but as she said them she moved toward her clothes.

She paused, went to the closet.

The green dress. It was warmer.

A warm dress and a short walk—that will clear my head. Then I'll come back and sleep.

It's perfectly safe.

She started for the door, stopped, returned to the window. Maud and Louise would still be up, talking.

She slid one leg over the sill; then the other leg.

Softly she dropped to the frosted lawn.

The gate did not creak.

She walked into the darkness.

Better! So much better. Good clean air that you can breathe!

The town was a silence. A few lights gleamed in distant houses, up ahead; behind, there was only blackness. And the wind.

In the heavy green frock, which was still too light to keep out the cold—though she felt no cold; only the needled heat—she walked away from the house and toward the depot.

It was a small structure, unchanged by passing years, like the Landon home and most of the homes in Burlington. There were tracks on either side of it.

Now it was deserted. Perhaps Mr. Gaffey was inside, making insect sounds on the wireless. Perhaps he was not.

Julia stepped over the first track, and stood, wondering what had happened and why she was here. Vaguely she understood something. Something about the yellow thread that had made her late and forced her to return home through the gathering dusk. And this dress—had she chosen it because it was warmer than the others . . . or because it was prettier?

Beyond this point there was wilderness, for miles. Marshes and fields overgrown with weeds and thick foliage. The hobo jungles: some tents, dead campfires, empty tins of canned heat.

She stepped over the second rail, and began to follow the gravel bed. Heat consumed her. She could not keep her hands still.

In a dim way, she realized—with a tiny part of her—why she had come out tonight.

She was looking for someone.

The words formed in her mind, unwilling: "Robert Oakes, listen, listen to me. You're not the only one who is lonely. But you can't steal what we're lonely for, you can't take it by force. Don't you know that? Haven't you learned that yet?"

I'll talk to him, she thought, and he'll go along with me and give himself up . . .

No.

That isn't why you're out tonight. You don't care

whether he gives himself up or not. You . . . only want him to know that you understand. Isn't that it?

You couldn't have any other reason.

It isn't possible that you're seeking out a lunatic for any other reason.

Certainly you don't want him to touch you.

Assuredly you don't want him to put his arms around you and kiss you, because no man has ever done that—assuredly, assuredly.

It isn't you he wants. It isn't love. He wouldn't be taking Julia Landon. . . .

"But what if he doesn't!" The words spilled out in a small choked cry. "What if he sees me and runs away! Or I don't find him. Others have been looking. What makes me think I'll—"

Now the air swelled with sounds of life: frogs and birds and locusts, moving; and the wind, running across the trees and reeds and foliage at immense speed, whining, sighing.

Everywhere there was this loudness, and a dark like none Julia had ever known. The moon was gone entirely. Shadowless, the surrounding fields were great pools of liquid black, stretching infinitely, without horizon.

Fear came up in her chest, clutching.

She tried to scream.

She stood paralyzed, moveless, a pale terror drying into her throat and into her heart.

Then, from far away, indistinctly, there came a sound. A sound like footsteps on gravel.

Julia listened, and tried to pierce the darkness. The sounds grew louder. And louder. Someone was on the tracks. Coming closer.

She waited. Years passed, slowly. Her breath turned into a ball of expanding ice in her lungs.

Now she could see, just a bit.

It was a man. A black man-form. Perhaps—the thought increased her fear—a hobo. It mustn't be one of the hobos.

No. It was a young man. Mick! Mick, come to tell her, "Well, we got the bastard!" and to ask, narrowly, "What the devil you doing out here, Julie?" Was it?

She saw the sweater. The ball of ice in her lungs began

to melt, a little. A sweater. And shoes that seemed almost white.

Not a hobo. Not Mick. Not anyone she knew.

She waited an instant longer. Then, at once, she knew without question who the young man was.

And she knew that he had seen her.

The fear went away. She moved to the center of the tracks.

"I've been looking for you," she said, soundlessly. "Every night I've thought of you. I have." She walked toward the man. "Don't be afraid, Mr. Oakes. Please don't be afraid. I'm not."

The young man stopped. He seemed to freeze, like an animal, prepared for flight.

He did not move, for several seconds.

Then he began to walk toward Julia, lightly, hesitantly, rubbing his hands along his trousers.

When Julia was close enough to see his eyes, she relaxed, and smiled.

Perhaps, she thought, feeling the first drops of rain upon her face, perhaps if I don't scream he'll let me live.

That would be nice.

Black Country

SPOOF COLLINS BLEW HIS BRAINS OUT, ALL RIGHT—right on out through the top of his head. But I don't mean with a gun. I mean with a horn. Every night: slow and easy, eight to one. And that's how he died. Climbing, with that horn, climbing up high. For what? "*Hey, man, Spoof—listen, you picked the tree, now come on down!*" But he couldn't come down, he didn't know how. He just kept climbing, higher and higher. And then he fell. Or jumped. Anyhow, *that's* the way he died.

The bullet didn't kill anything. I'm talking about the one that tore up the top of his mouth. It didn't kill anything that wasn't dead already. Spoof just put in an extra note, that's all.

We planted him out about four miles from town—home is where you drop: residential district, all wood construction. Rain? You know it. Bible type: sky like a month-old bedsheet, wind like a stepped-on cat, cold and dark, those Forty Days, those Forty Nights! But nice and quiet most of the time. Like Spoof: nice and quiet, with a lot underneath that you didn't like to think about.

We planted him and watched and put what was his down into the ground with him. His horn, battered, dented, nicked—right there in his hands, but not just there; I mean in position, so if he wanted to do some more climbing, all right, he could. And his music. We planted that too, because leaving it out would have been like leaving out Spoof's arms or his heart or his guts.

Lux started things off with a chord from his guitar, no particular notes, only a feeling, a sound. A Spoof Collins kind of sound. Jimmy Fritch picked it up with his stick and they talked a while—Lux got a real piano out of that git-box. Then when Jimmy stopped talking and stood there, waiting, Sonny Holmes stepped up and wiped his

mouth and took the melody on his shiny new trumpet. It wasn't Spoof, but it came close; and it was still *The Jimjam Man*, the way Spoof wrote it back when he used to write things down. Sonny got off with a high-squealing blast, and no eyes came up—we knew, we remembered. The kid always had it collared. He just never talked about it. And listen to him now! He stood there over Spoof's grave, giving it all back to The Ol' Massuh, giving it back right—"Broom off, white child, you got four sides!" "I want to learn from you, Mr. Collins. I want to play jazz and you can teach me." "I got things to do, I can't waste no time on a half-hipped young'un." "Please, Mr. Collins." "You got to stop that, you got to stop callin' me 'Mr. Collins,' hear?" "Yes sir, yes sir."—He put out real sound, like he didn't remember a thing. Like he wasn't playing for that pile of darkmeat in the ground, not at all; but for the great Spoof Collins, for the man Who Knew and the man Who Did, who gave jazz spats and dressed up the blues, who did things with a trumpet that a trumpet couldn't do, and more; for the man who could blow down the walls or make a chicken cry, without half trying—for the mighty Spoof, who'd once walked in music like a boy in river mud, loving it, breathing it, living it.

Then Sonny quit. He wiped his mouth again and stepped back and Mr. "T" took it on his trombone while I beat up the tubs.

Pretty soon we had *The Jimjam Man* rocking the way it used to rock. A little slow, maybe: it needed Bud Meunier on bass and a few trips on the piano. But it moved.

We went through *Take It From Me* and *Night in the Blues* and *Big Gig* and *Only Us Chickens* and *Forty G's*—Sonny's insides came out through the horn on that one, I could tell—and *Slice City Stomp*—you remember: sharp and clean, like sliding down a razor—and *What the Cats Dragged In*—the longs, the shorts, all the great Spoof Collins numbers. We wrapped them up and put them down there with him.

Then it got dark.

And it was time for the last one, the greatest one. . . . Rose-Ann shivered and cleared her throat; the rest

of us looked around, for the first time, at all those rows of split-wood grave markers, shining in the rain, and the trees and the coffin, dark, wet. Out by the fence, a couple of farmers stood watching. Just watching.

One—Rose-Ann opens her coat, puts her hands on her hips, wets her lips;

Two—Freddie gets the spit out of his stick, rolls his eyes;

Three—Sonny puts the trumpet to his mouth;

Four—

And we played Spoof's song, his last one, the one he wrote a long way ago, before the music dried out his head, before he turned mean and started climbing: *Black Country*. The song that said just a little of what Spoof wanted to say, and couldn't.

You remember. Spider-slow chords crawling down, soft, easy, and then bottom and silence and, suddenly, the cry of the horn, screaming in one note all the hate and sadness and loneliness, all the want and got-to-have; and then the note dying, quick, and Rose-Ann's voice, a whisper, a groan, a sigh. . . .

"Black Country is somewhere, Lord,

That I don't want to go.

Black Country is somewhere

That I never want to go.

Rain-water drippin'

On the bed and on the floor,

Rain-water drippin'

From the ground and through the door . . ."

We all heard the piano, even though it wasn't there. Fingers moving down those minor chords, those black keys, that black country . . .

"Well, in that old Black Country

If you ain't feelin' good,

They let you have an overcoat

That's carved right out of wood.

But way down there

It gets so dark

You never see a friend—

*Black Country may not be the Most,
But, Lord! it's sure the End . . ."*

Bitter little laughing words, piling up, now mad, now sad; and then, an ugly blast from the horn and Rose-Ann's voice screaming, crying:

*"I never want to go there, Lord!
I never want to be,
I never want to lay down
In that Black Country!"*

And quiet, quiet, just the rain, and the wind.

"Let's go, man," Freddie said.

So we turned around and left Spoof there under the ground.

Or, at least, that's what I thought we did.

Sonny took over without saying a word. He didn't have to: just who was about to fuss? He was white, but he didn't play white, not these days; and he learned the hard way—by unlearning. Now he could play gutbucket and he could play blues, stomp and slide, name it, Sonny could play it. Funny as hell to hear, too, because he looked like everything else but a musician. Short and skinny, glasses, nose like a melted candle, head clean as the one-ball, and white? Next to old Hushup, that café sunburn glowed like a flashlight.

"Man, who skinned you?"

"Who dropped you in the flour barrel?"

But he got closer to Spoof than any of the rest of us did. He knew what to do, and why. Just like a school teacher all the time: "That's good, Lux, that's awful good—now let's play some music." "Get off it, C. T.—what's Lenox Avenue doing in the middle of Lexington?" "Come on, boys, hang on to the sound, hang on to it!" Always using words like "flavor" and "authentic" and "blood," peering over those glasses, pounding his feet right through the floor: STOMP! STOMP! "That's it, we've got it now—oh, listen! It's true, it's clean!" STOMP! STOMP!

Not the easiest to dig him. Nobody broke all the way through.

"How come, boy? What for?" and every time the same answer:

"I want to play jazz."

Like he'd joined the Church and didn't want to argue about it.

Spoof was still Spoof when Sonny started coming around. Not a lot of people with us then, but a few, enough—the longhairs and critics and connoisseurs—and some real ears too—enough to fill a club every night, and who needs more? It was COLLINS AND HIS CREW, tight and neat, never a performance, always a session. Lot of music, lot of fun. And a line-up that some won't forget: Jimmy Fritch on clarinet, Honker Reese on alto-sax, Charles di Lusso on tenor, Spoof on trumpet, Henry Walker on piano, Lux Anderson on banjo and myself—Hushup Paige—on drums. Newmown hay, all right, I know—I remember, I've heard the records we cut—but, the Road was there.

Sonny used to hang around the old Continental Club on State Street in Chicago, every night, listening. Eight o'clock roll 'round, and there he'd be—a little different: younger, skinnier—listening hard, over in a corner all to himself, eyes closed like he was asleep. Once in a while he put in a request—*Darktown Strutter's Ball* was one he liked, and some of Jelly Roll's numbers—but mostly he just sat there, taking it all in. For real.

And it kept up like this for two or three weeks, regular as 2/4.

Now Spoof was mean in those days—don't think he wasn't—but not blood-mean. Even so, the white boy in the corner bugged Ol' Massuh after a while and he got to making dirty cracks with his horn: WAAAAA! *Git your ass out of here.* WAAAAA! *You only think you're with it!* WAAAAA! *There's a little white child sittin' in a chair there's a little white child losin' all his hair . . .*

It got to the kid, too, every bit of it. And that made Spoof even madder. But what can you do?

Came Honker's trip to Slice City along about then: our saxman got a neck all full of the sharpest kind of steel. So we were out one horn. And you could tell: we played

a little bit too rough, and the head-arrangements Collins and His Crew grew up to, they needed Honker's grease in the worst way. But we'd been together for five years or more, and a new man just didn't play somehow. We were this one solid thing, like a unit, and somebody had cut off a piece of us and we couldn't grow the piece back so we just tried to get along anyway, bleeding every night, bleeding from that wound.

Then one night it bust. We'd gone through some slow walking stuff, some tricky stuff and some loud stuff—still covering up—when this kid, this white boy, got up from his chair and ankled over and tapped Spoof on the shoulder. It was break-time and Spoof was brought down about Honker, about how bad we were sounding, sitting there sweating, those pounds of man, black as coaldust soaked in oil—he was the *blackest* man!—and those eyes, beady white and small as agates.

"Excuse me, Mr. Collins, I wonder if I might have a word with you?" He wondered if he might have a word with Mr. Collins!

Spoof swiveled in his chair and clapped a look around the kid. "Hnff?"

"I notice that you don't have a sax man any more."

"You don't mean to tell me?"

"Yes sir. I thought—I mean, I was wondering if—"

"Talk up, boy. I can't hear you."

The kid looked scared. Lord, he looked scared—and he was white to begin with.

"Well sir, I was just wondering if—if you needed a saxophone."

"You know somebody plays sax?"

"Yes sir, I do."

"And who might that be?"

"Me."

"You."

"Yes sir."

Spoof smiled a quick one. Then he shrugged. "Broom off, son," he said. "Broom 'way off."

The kid turned red. He all of a sudden didn't look scared any more. Just mad. Mad as hell. But he didn't say anything. He went on back to his table and then it was end of the ten.

We swung into *Basin Street*, smooth as Charley's tenor could make it, with Lux Anderson talking it out: *Basin Street, man, it is the street, Where the elite, well, they gather 'round to eat a little . . .* And we fooled around with the slow stuff for a while. Then Spoof lifted his horn and climbed up two-and-a-half and let out his trademark, that short high screech that sounded like something dying that wasn't too happy about it. And we rocked some, Henry taking it, Jimmy kanoodling the great headwork that only Jimmy knows how to do, me slamming the skins—and it was nowhere. Without Honker to keep us all on the ground, we were just making noise. Good noise, all right, but not music. And Spoof knew it. He broke his mouth blowing—to prove it.

And we cussed the cat that sliced our man.

Then, right away—nobody could remember when it came in—suddenly, we had us an alto-sax. Smooth and sure and snaky, that sound put a knot on each of us and said: Bust loose now, boys, I'll pull you back down. Like sweet-smelling glue, like oil in a machine, like—Honker.

We looked around and there was the kid, still sore, blowing like a madman, and making fine fine music.

Spoof didn't do much. Most of all, he didn't stop the number. He just let that horn play, listening—and when we slid over all the rough spots and found us backed up neat as could be, the Ol' Massuh let out a grin and a nod and a "Keep blowin', young'un!" and we knew that we were going to be all right.

After it was over, Spoof walked up to the kid. They looked at each other, sizing it up, taking it in.

Spoof says: "You did good."

And the kid—he was still burned—says: "You mean I did *damn* good."

And Spoof shakes his head. "No, that ain't what I mean."

And in a second one was laughing while the other one blushed. Spoof had known all along that the kid was faking, that he'd just been lucky enough to know our style on *Basin Street* up-down-and-across.

The Ol' Massuh waited for the kid to turn and start to slink off, then he said: "Boy, you want to go to work?" . . .

Sonny learned so fast it scared you. Spoof never held back; he turned it all over, everything it had taken us our whole lives to find out.

And—we had some good years. Charley di Lusso dropped out, and we took on Bud Meunier—the greatest bass man of them all—and Lux threw away his banjo for an AC-DC git-box and old C. T. Mr. “T” Green and his trombone joined the Crew. And we kept growing and getting stronger—no million-copies platter sales or stands at the Paramount—too “special”—but we never ate too far down on the hog, either.

In a few years Sonny Holmes was making that sax stand on its hind legs and jump through hoops that Honker never dreamed about. Spoof let him strictly alone. When he got mad it wasn’t ever because Sonny had white skin—Spoof always was too busy to notice things like that—but only because The Ol’ Massuh had to get T’d off at each of us every now and then. He figured it kept us on our toes.

In fact, except right at first, there never was any real blood between Spoof and Sonny until Rose-Ann came along.

Spoof didn’t want a vocalist with the band. But the coonshouting days were gone alas, except for Satchmo and Calloway—who had style: none of us had style, man, we just hollered—so when push came to shove, we had to put out the net.

And chickens aplenty came to crow and plenty moved on fast and we were about to give up when a dusky doll of 20-ought stepped up and let loose a hunk of *The Man I Love* and that’s all, brothers, end of the search.

Rose-Anne McHugh was a little like Sonny: where she came from, she didn’t know a ball of cotton from a piece of popcorn. She’d studied piano for a flock of years with a Pennsylvania longhair, read music whipfast and had been pointed toward the Big Steinway and the O.M.’s, Chopin and Bach and all that jazz. And good—I mean, she could pull some very fancy noise out of those keys. But it wasn’t the Road. She’d heard a few records of Muggsy Spanier’s, a couple of Jelly Roll’s—*New Orleans Bump*, *Shreveport Stomp*, old *Wolverine Blues*—and she

just got took hold of. Like it happens, all the time. She knew.

Spoof hired her after the first song. And we could see things in her eyes for The Ol' Massuh right away, fast. Bad to watch: I mean to say, she was chicken dinner, but what made it ugly was, you could tell she hadn't been in the oven very long.

Anyway, most of us could tell. Sonny, for instance.

But Spoof played tough to begin. He gave her the treatment, all the way. To see if she'd hold up. Because, above everything else, there was the Crew, the Unit, the Group. It was right, it had to stay right.

"Gal, forget your hands—that's for the cats out front. Leave 'em alone. And pay attention to the music, hear?"

"You ain't got a 'voice,' you got an instrument. And you ain't even started to learn how to play on it. Get some sound, bring it on out."

"Stop that throat stuff—you' singin' with the Crew now. From the belly, gal, from the belly. That's where music comes from, hear?"

And she loved it, like Sonny did. She was with The Ol' Massuh, she knew what he was talking about.

Pretty soon she fit just fine. And when she did, and everybody knew she did, Spoof eased up and waited and watched the old machine click right along, one-two, one-two.

That's when he began to change. Right then, with the Crew growed up and in long pants at last. Like we didn't need him any more to wash our face and comb our hair and switch our behinds for being bad.

Spoof began to change. He beat out time and blew his riffs, but things were different and there wasn't anybody who didn't know that for a fact.

In a hurry, all at once, he wrote down all his great arrangements, quick as he could. One right after the other. And we wondered why—we'd played them a million times.

Then he grabbed up Sonny. *"White Boy, listen. You want to learn how to play trumpet?"*

And the blood started between them. Spoof rode on Sonny's back twenty-four hours, showing him lip, showing him breath. *"This ain't a saxophone, boy, it's a trumpet,*

a music-horn. Get it right—do it again—that's lousy—do it again—that was nowhere—do it again—do it again!" All the time.

Sonny worked hard. Anybody else, they would have told The Ol' Massuh where he could put that little old horn. But the kid knew something was being given to him—he didn't know why, nobody did, but for a reason—something that Spoof wouldn't have given anybody else. And he was grateful. So he worked. And he didn't ask any how-comes, either.

Pretty soon he started to handle things right. 'Way down the road from great, but coming along. The sax had given him a hard set of lips and he had plenty of wind; most of all, he had the spirit—the thing that you can beat up your chops about it for two weeks straight and never say what it is, but if it isn't there, buddy-ghee, you may get to be President but you'll never play music.

Lord, Lord, Spoof worked that boy like a two-ton jockey on a ten-ounce horse. "*Do it again—that ain't right—goddamn it, do it again! Now one more time!*"

When Sonny knew enough to sit in with the horn on a few easy ones, Ol' Massuh would tense up and follow the kid with his eyes—I mean it got real crawly. What for? Why was he pushing it like that?

Then it quit. Spoof didn't say anything. He just grunted and quit all of a sudden, like he'd done with us, and Sonny went back on sax and that was that.

Which is when the real blood started.

The Lord says every man has got to love something, sometimes, somewhere. First choice is a chick, but there's other choices. Spoof's was a horn. He was married to a piece of brass, just as married as a man can get. Got up with it in the morning, talked with it all day long, loved it at night like no chick I ever heard of got loved. And I don't mean one-two-three: I mean the slow-building kind. He'd kiss it and hold it and watch out for it. Once a cat full of tea tried to put the snatch on Spoof's horn, for laughs: when Spoof caught up with him, that cat gave up laughing for life.

Sonny knew this. It's why he never blew his stack at all the riding. Spoof's teaching him to play trumpet—the trumpet—was like as if The Ol' Massuh had said: "*You*

want to take my wife for a few nights? You do? Then here, let me show you how to do it right. She likes it done right."

For Rose-Ann, though, it was the worst. Every day she got that look deeper in, and in a while we turned around and, man! *Where* is little Rosie? She was gone. That young half-fried chicken had flew the roost. And in her place was a doll that wasn't dead, a big bunch of curves and skin like a brand-new penny. Overnight, almost. Sonny noticed. Freddie and Lux and even old Mr. "T" noticed. *I* had eyes in my head. But Spoof didn't notice. He was already in love, there wasn't any more room.

Rose-Ann kept snapping the whip, but Ol' Massuh, he wasn't *about* to make the trip. He'd started climbing, then, and he didn't treat her any different than he treated us.

"Get away, gal, broom on off—can't you see I'm busy? Wiggle it elsewhere, hear? Elsewhere. Shoo!"

And she just loved him more for it. Every time he kicked her, she loved him more. Tried to find him and see him and, sometimes, when he'd stop for breath, she'd try to help, because she knew something had crawled inside Spoof, something that was eating from the inside out, that maybe he couldn't get rid of alone.

Finally, one night, at a two-weeker in Dallas, it tumbled.

We'd gone through *Georgia Brown* for the tourists and things were kind of dull, when Spoof started sweating. His eyes began to roll. And he stood up, like a great big animal—like an ape or a bear, big and powerful and mean-looking—and he gave us the two-finger signal.

Sky-High. 'Way before it was due, before either the audience or any of us had got wound up.

Freddie frowned. "You think it's time, Top?"

"Listen," Spoof said, "goddamn it, who says when it's time—you, or me?"

We went into it, cold, but things warmed up pretty fast. The dancers grumbled and moved off the floor and the place filled up with talk.

I took my solo and beat hell out of the skins. Then Spoof swiped at his mouth and let go with a blast and moved it

up into that squeal and stopped and started playing. It was all headwork. All new to us.

New to anybody.

I saw Sonny get a look on his face, and we sat still and listened while Spoof made love to that horn.

Now like a scream, now like a laugh—now we're swinging in the trees, now the white men are coming, now we're in the boat and chains are hanging from our ankles and we're rowing, rowing—*Spoof, what is it?*—now we're sawing wood and picking cotton and serving up those cool cool drinks to the Colonel in his chair—*Well, blow, man!*—now we're free, and we're struttin' down Lenox Avenue and State & Madison and Pirate's Alley, laughing, crying—*Who said free?*—and we want to go back and we don't want to go back—*Play it, Spoof! God, God, tell us all about it! Talk to us!*—and we're sitting in a cellar with a comb wrapped up in paper, with a skin-barrel and a tinklebox—*Don't stop, Spoof! Oh Lord, please don't stop!*—and we're making something, something, what is it? Is it jazz? Why, yes, Lord, it's jazz. Thank you, sir, and thank you, sir, we finally got it, something that is *ours*, something great that belongs to us and to us alone, that we made, and *that's* why it's important, and *that's* what it's all about and—*Spoof! Spoof, you can't stop now—*

But it was over, middle of the trip. And there was Spoof standing there facing us and tears streaming out of those eyes and down over that coaldust face, and his body shaking and shaking. It's the first we ever saw that. It's the first we ever heard him cough, too—like a shotgun going off every two seconds, big raking sounds that tore up from the bottom of his belly and spilled out wet and loud.

The way it tumbled was this. Rose-Ann went over to him and tried to get him to sit down. "Spoof, honey, what's wrong? Come on and sit down. Honey, don't just stand there."

Spoof stopped coughing and jerked his head around. He looked at Rose-Ann for a while and whatever there was in his face, it didn't have a name. The whole room was just as quiet as it could be.

Rose-Ann took his arm. "Come on, honey, Mr. Collins—"

He let out one more cough, then, and drew back his hand—that black-topped, pink-palmed ham of a hand—and laid it, sharp, across the girl's cheek. It sent her staggering. "Git off my back, hear? Damn it, git off! Stay 'way from me!"

She got up crying. Then, you know what she did? She waltzed on back and took his arm and said: "Please."

Spoof was just a lot of crazy-mad on two legs. He shouted out some words and pulled back his hand again. "Can't you never learn? What I got to do, goddamn little—"

Then—Sonny moved. All-the-time quiet and soft and gentle Sonny. He moved quick across the floor and stood in front of Spoof.

"Keep your black hands off her," he said.

Ol' Massuh pushed Rose-Ann aside and planted his legs, his breath rattling fast and loose, like a bull's. And he towered over the kid, Goliath and David, legs far apart on the boards and fingers curled up, bowling balls at the ends of his sleeves.

"You talkin' to me, boy?"

Sonny's face was red, like I hadn't seen it since that first time at the Continental Club, years back. "You've got ears, Collins. Touch her again and I'll kill you."

I don't know exactly what we expected, but I know what we were afraid of. We were afraid Spoof would let go; and if he did . . . well, put another bed in the hospital, men. He stood there, breathing, and Sonny gave it right back—for hours, days and nights, for a month, toe to toe.

Then Spoof relaxed. He pulled back those fat lips, that didn't look like lips any more, they were so tough and leathery, and showed a mouthful of white and gold, and grunted, and turned, and walked away.

We swung into *Twelfth Street Rag* in *such* a hurry!
And it got kicked under the sofa.

But we found out something, then, that nobody even suspected.

Sonny had it for Rose-Ann. He had it bad.
And that ain't good.

Spoof fell to pieces after that. He played day and night, when we were working, when we weren't working. Climbing. Trying to get it said, all of it.

"Listen, you can't hit Heaven with a slingshot, Daddy-O!"

"What you want to do, man—blow Judgment?"

He never let up. If he ate anything, you tell me when. Sometimes he tied on, straight stuff, quick, medicine type of drinking. But only after he'd been climbing and started to blow flat and ended up in those coughing fits.

And it got worse. Nothing helped, either: foam or booze or tea or even Indoor Sports, and he tried them all. And got worse.

"Get fixed up, Mr. C, you hear? See a bone-man; you in bad shape . . ."

"Get away from me, get on away!" Hawk! and a big red spot on the handkerchief. *"Broom off! Shoo!"*

And gradually the old horn went sour, ugly and bitter sounding, like Spoof himself. Hoo Lord, the way he rode Sonny then: *"How you like the dark stuff, boy? You like it pretty good? Hey there, don't hold back. Rosie's fine talent—I know. Want me to tell you about it, pave the way, show you how? I taught you everything else, didn't I?"* And Sonny always clamming up, his eyes doing the talking: *"You were a great musician, Collins, and you still are, but that doesn't mean I've got to like you—you won't let me. And you're damn right I'm in love with Rose-Ann! That's the biggest reason why I'm still here—just to be close to her. Otherwise, you wouldn't see me for the dust. But you're too dumb to realize she's in love with you, too dumb and stupid and mean and wrapped up with that lousy horn!"*

What Sonny was too dumb to know was, Rose-Ann had cut Spoof out. She was now Public Domain.

Anyway, Spoof got to be the meanest, dirtiest, craziest, low-talkin'est man in the world. And nobody could come in: he had signs out all the time. . . .

The night that he couldn't even get a squeak out of his trumpet and went back to the hotel—alone, always alone—and put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger, we found something out.

We found out what it was that had been eating at The Ol' Massuh.

Cancer.

Rose-Ann took it the hardest. She had the dry-weepers for a long time, saying it over and over: "Why didn't he let us know? Why didn't he tell us?"

But, you get over things. Even women do, especially when they've got something to take its place.

We reorganized a little. Sonny cut out the sax—saxes were getting cornball anyway—and took over on trumpet. And we decided against keeping Spoof's name. It was now SONNY HOLMES AND HIS CREW.

And we kept on eating high up. Nobody seemed to miss Spoof—not the cats in front, at least—because Sonny blew as great a horn as anybody could want, smooth and sure, full of excitement and clean as a gnat's behind.

We played across the States and back, and they loved us—thanks to the kid. Called us an "institution" and the disc-jockeys began to pick up our stuff. We were "real," they said—the only authentic jazz left, and who am I to push it? Maybe they were right.

Sonny kept things in low. And then, when he was sure—damn that slow way: it had been a cinch since back when—he started to pay attention to Rose-Ann. She played it cool, the way she knew he wanted it, and let it build up right. Of course, who didn't know she would've married him this minute, now, just say the word? But Sonny was a very conscientious cat indeed.

We did a few stands in France about that time—Listen to them holler!—and a couple of England and Sweden—getting better, too—and after a breather, we cut out across the States again.

It didn't happen fast, but it happened sure. Something was sounding flat all of a sudden like—wrong, in a way:

During an engagement in El Paso we had *What the Cats Dragged In* lined up. You all know *Cats*—the rhythm section still, with the horns yelling for a hundred bars, then that fast and solid beat, that high trip and trumpet solo? Sonny had the ups on a wild riff and was coming on down, when he stopped. Stood still, with the horn to his lips; and we waited.

"Come on, wrap it up—you want a drum now? What's the story, Sonny?"

Then he started to blow. The notes came out the same almost, but not quite the same. They danced out of the horn strop-razor sharp and sliced up high and blasted low and the cats all fell out. "Do it! Go! Go, man! Oooo, I'm out of the boat, don't pull me back! Sing out, man!"

The solo lasted almost seven minutes. When it was time for us to wind it up, we just about forgot.

The crowd went wild. They stomped and screamed and whistled. But they couldn't get Sonny to play any more. He pulled the horn away from his mouth—I mean that's the way it looked, as if he was yanking it away with all his strength—and for a second he looked surprised, like he'd been goosed. Then his lips pulled back into a smile.

It was the *damndest* smile!

Freddie went over to him at the break. "Man, that was the craziest. How many tongues you got?"

But Sonny didn't answer him.

Things went along all right for a little. We played a few dances in the cities, some radio stuff, cut a few platters. Easy walking style.

Sonny played Sonny—plenty great enough. And we forget about what happened in El Paso. So what? So he cuts loose once—can't a man do that if he feels the urge? Every jazz man brings that kind of light at least once.

We worked through the sticks and were finally set for a New York opening when Sonny came in and gave us the news.

It was a gasser. Lux got sore. Mr. "T" shook his head. "*Why? How come, Top?*"

He had us booked for the corn-belt. The old-time route, exactly, even the old places, back when we were playing razzmatazz and feeling our way.

"You trust me?" Sonny asked. "You trust my judgment?"

"Come off it, Top; you know we do. Just tell us how come. Man, New York's what we been working for—"

"That's just it," Sonny said. "We aren't ready."

That brought us down. How did we know—we hadn't even thought about it.

"We need to get back to the real material. When we play in New York, it's not anything anybody's liable to forget in a hurry. And that's why I think we ought to take a refresher course. About five weeks. All right?"

Well, we fussed some and fumed some, but not much, and in the end we agreed to it. Sonny knew his stuff, that's what we figured.

"Then it's settled."

And we lit out.

Played mostly the old stuff dressed up—*Big Gig, Only Us Chickens*—and the rest—or head-arrangements with a lot of trumpet. Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky . . .

When we hit Louisiana for a two-nighter at the Tropics, the same thing happened that did back in Texas. Sonny blew wild for eight minutes on a solo that broke the glasses and cracked the ceiling and cleared the dance-floor like a tornado. Nothing off the stem, either—but like it was practice, sort of, or exercise. A solo out of nothing, that didn't even try to hang on to a shred of the melody.

"Man, it's great, but let us know when it's gonna happen, hear!"

About then Sonny turned down the flame on Rose-Ann. He was polite enough and a stranger wouldn't have noticed, but we did, and Rose-Ann did—and it was tough for her to keep it all down under, hidden. All those questions, all those memories and fears.

He stopped going out and took to hanging around his rooms a lot. Once in a while he'd start playing: one time we listened to that horn all night.

Finally—it was still somewhere in Louisiana—when Sonny was reaching with his trumpet so high he didn't get any more sound out of it than a dog-whistle, and the front cats were laughing up a storm, I went over and put it to him flatfooted.

His eyes were big and he looked like he was trying to say something and couldn't. He looked scared.

"Sonny . . . look, boy, what are you after? Tell a friend, man, don't lock it up."

But he didn't answer me. He couldn't.

He was coughing too hard.

Here's the way we doped it: Sonny had worshiped Spoof, like a god or something. Now some of Spoof was rubbing off, and he didn't know it.

Freddie was elected. Freddie talks pretty good most of the time.

"Get off the train, Jack. Ol' Massuh's gone now, dead and buried. Mean, what he was after ain't to be had. Mean, he wanted it all and then some—and all is all, there isn't any more. You play the greatest, Sonny—go on, ask anybody. Just fine. So get off the train. . . ."

And Sonny laughed, and agreed and promised. I mean in words. His eyes played another number, though.

Sometimes he snapped out of it, it looked like, and he was fine then—tired and hungry, but with it. And we'd think, He's okay. Then it would happen all over again—only worse. Every time, worse.

And it got so Sonny even talked like Spoof half the time: "Broom off, man, leave me alone, will you? Can't you see I'm busy, got things to do? Get away!" And walked like Spoof—that slow walk-in-your-sleep shuffle. And did little things—like scratching his belly and leaving his shoes unlaced and rehearsing in his undershirt.

He started to smoke weeds in Alabama.

In Tennessee he took the first drink anybody ever saw him take.

And always with that horn—cussing it, yelling at it, getting sore because it wouldn't do what he wanted it to.

We had to leave him alone, finally. "I'll handle it . . . I—understand, I think. . . . Just go away, it'll be all right. . . ."

Nobody could help him. Nobody at all.

Especially not Rose-Ann.

End of the corn-belt route, the way Sonny had it booked, was the Copper Club. We hadn't been back there since the night we planted Spoof—and we didn't feel very good about it.

But a contract isn't anything else.

So we took rooms at the only hotel there ever was in the town. You make a guess which room Sonny took. And we played some cards and bruised our chops and

tried to sleep and couldn't. We tossed around in the beds, listening, waiting for the horn to begin. But it didn't. All night long, it didn't.

We found out why, oh yes. . . .

Next day we all walked around just about everywhere except in the direction of the cemetery. Why kick up misery? Why make it any harder?

Sonny stayed in his room until ten before opening, and we began to worry. But he got in under the wire.

The Copper Club was packed. Yokels and farmers and high school stuff, a jazz "connoisseur" here and there—to the beams. Freddie had set up the stands with the music notes all in order, and in a few minutes we had our positions.

Sonny came out wired for sound. He looked—powerful; and that's a hard way for a five-foot four-inch bald-headed white man to look. At any time. Rose-Ann threw me a glance and I threw it back, and collected it from the rest. Something bad. Something real bad. Soon.

Sonny didn't look any which way. He waited for the applause to die down, then he did a quick One-Two-Three-Four and we swung into *The Jimjam Man*, our theme.

I mean to say, that crowd was with us all the way—they smelled something.

Sonny did the thumb-and-little-finger signal and we started *Only Us Chickens*. Bud Meunier did the intro on his bass, then Henry took over on the piano. He played one hand racing the other. The front cats hollered "Go! Go!" and Henry went. His left hand crawled on down over the keys and scrambled and didn't fuzz once or slip once and then walked away, cocky and proud, like a mouse full of cheese from an unsprung trap.

"Hooo-boy! Play, Henry, play!"

Sonny watched and smiled. "Bring it on out," he said, gentle, quiet, pleased. "Keep bringin' it out."

Henry did that counterpoint business that you're not supposed to be able to do unless you have two right arms and four extra fingers, and he got that boiler puffing, and he got it shaking, and he screamed his Henry Walker "WoooooOOOOO!" and he finished. I came in on the

tubs and beat them up till I couldn't see for the sweat, hit the cymbal and waited.

Mr. "T," Lux and Jimmy fiddlefaddled like a coop of capons talking about their operation for a while. Rose-Ann chanted: "Only us chickens in the hen-house, Daddy, Only us chickens here, Only us chickens in the hen-house, Daddy, Ooo-bob-a-roo, Ooo-bob-a-roo . . ."

Then it was horn time. Time for the big solo.

Sonny lifted the trumpet—One! Two!—He got it into sight—Three!

We all stopped dead. I mean we stopped.

That wasn't Sonny's horn. This one was dented-in and beat-up and the tip-end was nicked. It didn't shine, not a bit.

Lux leaned over—you could have fit a coffee cup into his mouth. "Jesus God," he said. "Am I seeing right?"

I looked close and said: "Man, I hope not."

But why kid? We'd seen that trumpet a million times. It was Spoof's.

Rose-Ann was trembling. Just like me, she remembered how we'd buried the horn with Spoof. And she remembered how quiet it had been in Sonny's room last night. . . .

I started to think real hophead thoughts, like—where did Sonny get hold of a shovel that late? and how could he expect a horn to play that's been under the ground for two years? and—

That blast got into our ears like long knives.

Spoof's own trademark!

Sonny looked caught, like he didn't know what to do at first, like he was hypnotized, scared, almighty scared. But as the sound came out, rolling out, sharp and clean and clear—new-trumpet sound—his expression changed. His eyes changed: they danced a little and opened wide.

Then he closed them, and blew that horn. Lord God of the Fishes, how he blew it! How he loved it and caressed it and pushed it up, higher and higher and higher. High C? Bottom of the barrel. He took off, and he walked all over the rules and stamped them flat.

The melody got lost, first off. Everything got lost, then, while that horn flew. It wasn't only jazz; it was the heart

of jazz, and the insides, pulled out with the roots and held up for everybody to see; it was blues that told the story of all the lonely cats and all the ugly whores who ever lived, blues that spoke up for the loser lamping sunshine out of iron-gray bars and every hophead hooked and gone, for the bindlestiffs and the city slickers, for the country boys in Georgia shacks and the High Yellow hipsters in Chicago slums and the bootblacks on the corners and the fruits in New Orleans, a blues that spoke for all the lonely, sad and anxious downers who could never speak themselves. . . .

And then, when it had said all this, it stopped and there was a quiet so quiet that Sonny could have shouted:

"It's okay, Spoof. It's all right now. You'll get it said, all of it—I'll help you. God, Spoof, you showed me how, you planned it—I'll do my best!"

And he laid back his head and fastened the horn and pulled in air and blew some more. Not sad, now, not blues—but not anything else you could call by a name. Except . . . jazz. It was jazz.

Hate blew out of that horn, then. Hate and fury and mad and fight, like screams and snarls, like little razors shooting at you, millions of them, cutting, cutting deep. . . .

And Sonny only stopping to wipe his lip and whisper in the silent room full of people: "You're saying it, Spoof! You are!"

God Almighty Himself must have heard that trumpet, then; slapping and hitting and hurting with notes that don't exist and never existed. Man! Life took a real beating! Life got groined and sliced and belly-punched and the horn, it didn't stop until everything had all spilled out, every bit of the hate and mad that's built up in a man's heart.

Rose-Ann walked over to me and dug her nails into my hand as she listened to Sonny. . . .

"Come on now, Spoof! Come on! We can do it! Let's play the rest and play it right. You know it's got to be said, you know it does. Come on, you and me together!"

And the horn took off with a big yellow blast and started to laugh. I mean it laughed! Hooted and hollered and jumped around, dancing, singing, strutting through those notes that never were there. Happy music? Joy-

ful music? It was chicken dinner and an empty stomach; it was big-butted women and big white beds; it was country walking and windy days and fresh-born crying and—Oh, there just doesn't happen to be any happiness that didn't come out of that horn.

Sonny hit the last high note—the Spoof blast—but so high you could just barely hear it.

Then Sonny dropped the horn. It fell onto the floor and bounced and lay still.

And nobody breathed. For a long, long time.

Rose-Ann let go of my hand, at last. She walked across the platform, slowly, and picked up the trumpet and handed it to Sonny.

He knew what she meant.

We all did. It was over now, over and done. . . .

Lux plucked out the intro. Jimmy Fritch picked it up and kept the melody.

Then we all joined in, slow and quiet, quiet as we could. With Sonny—I'm talking about *Sonny*—putting out the kind of sound he'd always wanted to.

And Rose-Ann sang it, clear as a mountain wind—not just from her heart, but from her belly and her guts and every living part of her.

For The Ol' Massuh, just for him. Spoof's own song:
Black Country.

The Love-Master

"MY WIFE IS FRIGID," SAID THE YOUNG MAN, GETTING directly to the point. "That's the long and the short of it."

"Nonsense!" Salvadori raised a desiccated finger to his fine Roman nose. "Women," he declared, "are creatures of milk and blood and fire; they are cradles of delight, ships of spices, doorways leading to lands of wonder!"

"That may be," responded the young man. "But my wife Beatrice—"

"—is no different." Candlelight shot the rapids of the Love-Master's brook-gray hair as he nodded impatiently. "I assure you of that."

"You don't know her."

"She is a woman? Young? Healthy?"

"Yes."

"Then I do not need to know her." Salvadori rolled the wheel chair up close to his visitor and studied the lean, pale features. There was something vaguely disturbing here, something a bit off-center, but he could not place it. Perhaps the hat, a large and incongruous Stetson. "Mr. Cubbison, I trust that you, yourself, are not—ah—"

The young man flushed. "There is nothing wrong with me," he said. "Physically."

"Then," Salvadori said, "you have little to worry about. Only remember this: There is no such thing as a frigid woman. They are all as alike as locks, and want but the proper key."

"Nice simile," Cubbison granted, "but not very believable. I've tried everything."

At that the Love-Master grinned, crookedly, like an ancient tiger. He was incredibly old, that much one could see in the parchmented flesh, the veined and white-

whiskered arms, the woollen shawl tucked under trembling knees; but there was power of a kind in that creaking hull of skin, and from those dark olive eyes there shone a light that told of other years, better days.

"Everything, Mr. Cubbison?"

Once again the visitor flushed. His glance traveled uncomfortably over the dusty room, returning at last to the old man in the wheel chair. "I think perhaps we ought to get down to business," he said nervously. "But I warn you, I haven't much faith in love potions or spells or any of that sort of thing."

"Nor do I," replied Salvadori. "They are buncombe."

Cubbison's eyes flickered. "I'm afraid I don't understand," he said. "I'd heard that you were some kind of a wizard."

"And so I am," the old man laughed. "In a way. But I am no thief. I offer no magical formulae for success: merely the benefit of personal experience. This disappoints you?"

"It surprises me."

"Then you are typical. I cannot count the number of young frustrates who have come to me expecting miracles, hoping for pentagrams or at the very least, genii. They all felt quite cheated when I offered them, instead, conversation. But that attitude changed soon enough."

"Indeed?"

"Oh, yes. For, you see, I have never had an unsuccessful case."

"Never?"

Salvadori adjusted his white silk scarf. "Never," he said, humbly. His eyes momentarily gathered the distance of years. "There is actually nothing complex or sinister about it," he said. "Had I been a great matador in my youth, I would today be dispensing advice to neophyte *toreros*; similarly if I had been a great race driver, or hunter, or soldier. As it happens, I was a great lover." He sighed. "Alas, the rewards for my endeavors were not tangible. They could not be carried in the pocket, like a bull's ear, or mounted on the mantel, like a gold cup; yet they were real enough, and I have them all—*here*." Salvadori tapped his forehead.

Cubbison coughed and the old man's mind surfaced.

"Well, young fellow, do you want to avail yourself of my services, or not?"

"I can't see that it would do any harm."

"Very well, then. Pull up a chair."

The thin, hatted man dusted the seat of a harp-back with a handkerchief of fine linen and moved forward. "About the price—" he began.

"Afterward," Salvadori chuckled. He settled his iron-maned head against the pillow, closed his eyes and murmured: "Describe the subject. High points only, please."

"Well, she's . . . fairly attractive. Twenty-seven years of age. Hundred and ten pounds, I imagine. Good shape. May I smoke?"

"Describe the subject, Mr. Cubbison."

The young man took a long puff on the cigarette, then blurted: "Dammit, she's a fish, that's all. When we married, I understood that she'd been everywhere, done everything; you know, woman of the world. But I can't believe it. No matter what one tries, Beatrice simply shakes her head and treats the whole thing as if it were a pathetic joke. Of course, she *claims* to want to love—don't they all?—and she *pretends* to co-operate, but the end is always the same. Sometimes she cries, or laughs, or sits awake all night smoking; mostly she just says, 'Sorry, no good.'"

Salvadori listened carefully. Occasionally he would open one eye, then close it again. At length, when the visitor had concluded, he put his hands together and said: "Mr. Cubbison, I am glad to report that yours is one of the more basic dilemmas. I anticipate no difficulty whatever."

The young man's eyes widened. "You can say that?" he asked. "After all I've told you?"

"Of course." Salvadori leaned forward in the wheel chair. The guttering candle brought his handsome profile into sharp relief. "In fact, I shall prescribe a comparatively mild, but highly effective, remedy. Cubbison, have you ever heard of 'The Chinese Flip' method?"

"No, I can't say that I have."

"Then listen. Performed with anything approaching accuracy, this should put an end to your problem." Upon which remark, Salvadori went on to describe in minute

detail Method #12, which he'd learned a half-century before in Bechuanaland. He observed the shocked expression on his visitor's face and went through it all a second time.

"Good Lord," said the young man.

"Nothing, really, once you get the hang of it. But a word of caution—don't overdo. And now, good evening. I will see you tomorrow at midnight."

The Love-Master watched the gaunt young client walk dazedly from the room; then, when the door was closed, he fell into a sleep of dreams.

Next evening at twelve the soft knock came and Salvadori wheeled his aging body to the door. It was Mr. Cubbison, looking frailer and paler than ever before.

"No saccharine displays of gratitude," the Love-Master murmured, "and, please, no lurid descriptions. A simple check for one hundred dollars will suffice."

But the young man did not smile or make a move toward his checkbook.

"What's the trouble, are you ill?" Salvadori inquired, frowning. "It went well, needless to say?"

"No," the visitor said. "It didn't."

"Not at all?"

"No."

"Hmm." Salvadori looked startled for an instant, then regained his composure. "Well," he smiled, "it appears I underestimated the subject. Score one for her!"

"I'm afraid it isn't any use," Cubbison said, sighing deeply. "Of course, if you could meet her—that is—"

"Sorry! I no longer make house calls. It's a cardinal policy I've had to adopt, for reasons that should be manifest. For almost twenty years, Cubbison, women have tried to seduce me out of retirement; they have come by the hundreds and employed every low trick known to the female mind, but always they have failed. In the School for Scandal I am a professor *emeritus* and so it must and shall remain. Besides, we're in no trouble yet. Merely a call for stronger medicine . . ."

The old man tented his fingers and thought for a long time.

"Cubbison, I think we are going to try a little something called '*The Australian Hop*'—a facetious-sounding

but nonetheless lethal technique, originally developed for a certain recalcitrant maiden in the brush country, who—but never mind that. Tell me, how are your muscles?”

“All right, I suppose.”

“Then pay strict attention. The first step . . .”

In a way, Salvadori felt ashamed, for Method 18 was nominally for advanced students. It was a lot of technique for an amateur to handle. Still, there was one’s reputation to consider; and though one might become old and jaded, one had to eat . . .

When the gloved knock sounded again the following night, Salvadori chuckled, imagining the beatific expression of his client.

“Well?”

Cubbison shook his head sadly: there was a look of ineffable weariness—and defeat—about his eyes. “No go,” he said.

Salvadori blinked. “This,” he hawked, “is difficult to believe. You followed my instructions?”

“To the letter.”

“And the subject . . . did not respond?”

“Oh, she responded, all right. Like a dead eel. Like a frozen trout— See here, Mr. Salvadori, I’m very much afraid that Beatrice is beyond even your powers. I think we ought to give up. She and I will just go on living like sister and brother.”

“What?” The Love-Master reached out a trembling hand and laid it across his client’s face. “Mr. Cubbison, don’t be obscene. You have not, I hope, orally capitulated with your wife?”

“Beg pardon?”

“Let it go. Be quiet a moment; I must think.” Salvadori made fists and put them to his temples. “In the summer of ’04,” he said slowly, “in Florence, I made the acquaintance of a certain Princess, an altogether ravishing vessel but, alas, caught up like a fly in the web of virtue. It was perhaps my second most trying case, hard fought and won at no small expense. However, *won*. As I recall, it was Method 26—‘*The Drunken Reptile*’—that turned the trick.”

Mr. Cubbison, looking thin and wan beneath the Stetson, shrugged.

"My boy, my boy," Salvadori said gently, in a voice thick with confidence, "you mustn't despair. Remember: 'No tree so tall/it cannot fall.' Now listen . . ."

As the Love-Master spoke, seated there like a time-lost fragment of Roman sculpture, Cubbison's eyes grew large and frightened and occasionally he gasped.

Then he grinned. "Salvadori," he said, "what you have just described is without doubt the most shocking thing I've ever heard. But," he rose, "it might work!"

"Might? It will," the old man said. "You can count on that. Beatrice will love you forever!"

But, when the visitor left Salvadori did not find sleep so easy. It had been a long time since he'd heard of a woman whose defenses could withstand both *The Chinese Flip* and *The Australian Hop*. He could not even imagine a woman in *this* age upon whom Method 26 would not work its fiendish spell.

And yet . . .

"She laughed at me," the hatted Cubbison said, hotly. "Called me a damned acrobat!"

"You are surely exaggerating!"

"Not a bit. Laughed, I tell you. Said, 'Bunny, that's a scream!'"

"At what point?"

"The penultimate point. Where, according to your thesis, she ought to have been undulating in helpless frenzies."

"Gad." Salvadori bit his lip. "In this case, I fear it's time we brought out *The Big Guns*. Mr. Cubbison, yours has turned out, I must confess, to be a rare case; most rare, indeed. But the battle is not lost."

At which time the Love-Master, throwing caution to the winds, explained the workings of Method 34, '*The Tasmanian Trounce, Double Switchback and Rebound*!' It shocked even *his* hardened sensibilities; but it was fool-proof. No female could resist its insidious puissance; not possibly!

"She fell asleep," Cubbison said, one night later.

Salvadori got a wild, frantic look in his eyes. He outlined the dreadful Method 37—'*The Creeping Terror*'

—which, he recalled, had driven the Marquis de Silva Ramos' wife mad as a March hare thirty summers previous.

"She yawned," said Cubbison.

And Salvadori thought, *What a woman! She must indeed have been everywhere and done everything!* Carefully, he went through his entire repertoire, not excluding the nerve-shattering '*Belgian Carousel*' (Method 51) nor even '*Roman Times*' (Method 60), held in reserve since its first use on the adamant Lady Titterington, long gone to her reward.

But always it was the same. Always Cubbison would return with his report of failure. "She giggled," he would say; or, "She just looked at me."

Until at last, Salvadori saw clearly that there was but one thing to do.

"Mr. Cubbison, I have reached a decision. It violates my strictest rule of business, but, under the circumstances, there is unhappily no choice."

"Yes?" said Mr. Cubbison.

"There is one technique," Salvadori whispered, "which I have not mentioned. Method 100. It bears no name. It is absolutely guaranteed: on that, sir, I would stake my life." His countenance reddened with fierce pride. "However—to describe it to you would (and I mean no offense) be tantamount to handing a jar of nitroglycerin to a three-year-old baboon. I shudder to think of the consequences of even one small error . . . Only two men have ever mastered Method 100. The first, or so the rumor goes, was Don Giovanni. The second, myself. Therefore—"

The young client leaned forward, breathing heavily.

"Therefore, I shall make my first house call in fifteen years!"

Cubbison leaped to his feet; he seemed on the edge of tears. "Salvadori, can you mean it?" he quavered. "Would you?"

The old man raised a claw. "I dislike emotional excess," he said with distaste. "Please sit down and pay attention. Now: you will make very certain that the room is in darkness. Understood?"

"Yes, of course."

"And do not call me until the subject is nearly asleep. That is quite important. Should my identity be discovered"—Salvadori gave way to a paroxysm—"I'd have no peace for the rest of my days. The subject would be at my door constantly, entreating, imploring, threatening . . . It would be horrible."

"But," said Cubbison, "here is something. If I cannot repeat Method 100—"

"Once," Salvadori said, "is enough. She will, of course, go on hoping, but meanwhile (the ice having been broken, as it were) the other techniques will suffice."

The young man took the Love-Master's bony shoulders. "I—I hardly know what to say."

"Say good night, Mr. Cubbison. I do this only because it is necessary, and do not wish to dwell on it. I shall see you later."

Having braved the strumpet winds, Salvadori sat panting wearily in the darkened alcove, ruminating with displeasure on the ordeal before him. When a knight is old, he mused, heavy lie the cudgels. Heavy the mace and heavy the dirk and hard the battle.

He began to nod sleepily.

Then a voice whispered, "Now!" and the Love-Master straightened, senses alert. He rolled the chair in rubbery silence to the black room and entered.

"Cubbison?" he hissed softly.

No answer.

Well enough. Instinct brought him to the panoplied bed. Reflex put him into it.

He lay still for a time, going over Method 100 in his mind; then, listening to the steady breathing, absorbing the feral warmth, reluctantly he struck.

It went perfectly.

At the precise moment planned, he hurled his wizened frame back into the chair, exited the room, whispered "Cubbison, hop to it!" and caromed clattering out of the house, into the dark and wind-swept streets.

All over. He rumbled loose a mighty sigh. Reputation or no reputation, he told himself, rolling up the concrete

ramp to his quarters, he would never again break the rule.

Sleep for the Love-Master was immediate.

Promptly at midnight the next evening, there came again the gloved knock. Salvadori set aside his dish of smoked oysters. He was weak and racked with bamboo shoots of pain, but no longer disturbed.

"Come in, Mr. Cubbison."

The young man entered; he was smiling peculiarly.

"The charge," Salvadori said crisply, "is one thousand dollars. Cash, if you don't mind."

The visitor laid ten one-hundred-dollar bills on the scarred table.

"I trust it went well?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Everything satisfactory?"

"Yes!"

"Then, Cubbison, good-by to you."

The visitor, however, made no indication that he was prepared to leave. His smile grew broader. Then, suddenly, he rushed forward and planted a kiss on Salvadori's forehead.

"Damn it, boy," the old man spluttered, "get away!" Then Salvadori, the Love-Master, touched his assailant and gasped. His eyeballs threatened to roll from their sockets.

For the visitor, still smiling, had stepped back and, for the first time, removed the large Stetson; and golden locks of hair had casaded forth.

"Cubbison, in the name of decency!"

"I hope that you'll forgive me, darling," the visitor said, taking off coat, trousers, shirt and other encumbrances, "but it was the only way I could have you. And I couldn't take less!"

Salvadori's knuckles bleached against the chairarms. Within moments, to his profound dismay, he was staring at a woman of immense beauty—full-rounded, soft, and white as an elephant's tusk.

He shrank against the pillow as she laughed once and started padding toward him with all the deadly stealth of a starved panther.

"Cubbison!" Salvadori croaked, refusing to believe the trick that had been played. "*Cubbison!*"

The woman paused. "Call me Beatrice," she said. And then she sprang.

The Dark Music

IT WAS NOT A PATH AT ALL BUT A DRY WHITE RIVER of shells, washed clean by the hot summer rain and swept by the winds that came over the gulf from Mexico: a million crushed white shells, spread quietly over the cold earth, for the feet of Miss Lydia Maple.

She'd never seen the place before. She'd never been told of it. It couldn't have been purposeful, her stopping the bus at the unmarked turn, pausing, then inching down the narrow path and stopping again at the tree-formed arch; on the other hand, it certainly was not impulse. She had recognized impulsive actions for what they were years ago: animal actions. And, as she was proud to say, Miss Maple did not choose to think of herself as an animal. Which the residents of Sand Hill might have found a slightly odd attitude for a biology teacher, were it not so characteristic.

Perhaps it was this: that by its virginal nature, the area promised much in the way of specimens. Frogs would be here, and insects, and, if they were lucky, a few garden snakes for the bolder lads.

In any case, Miss Maple was well satisfied. And if one could judge from their excited murmurings, which filtered through the thickness of trees, so were the students.

She smiled. Leaning against the elm, now, with all the forest fragrance rising to her nostrils, and the clean gulf breeze cooling her, she was suddenly very glad indeed that she had selected today for the field trip. Otherwise, she would be at this moment seated in the chalky heat of the classroom. And she would be reminded again of the whole nasty business, made to defend her stand against the clucking tongues, or to pretend there was nothing to defend. The newspapers were not difficult to ignore, but it was impossible to shut away the attitude

of her colleagues; and—no: one must not think about it.

She looked at the shredded lace of sunlight.

It was a lovely spot! Not a single beer can, not a bottle nor a cellophane wrapper nor even a cigarette to suggest that human beings had ever been here before. It was—*pure*.

In a way, Miss Maple liked to think of herself in similar terms. She believed in purity, and had her own definition of the word. Of course she realized—how could she doubt it now?—she might be an outmoded and slightly incongruous figure in this day and age; but that was all right. She took pride in the distinction. And to Mr. Owen Tracy's famous remark that hers was the only biology class in the world where one would hear nothing to discourage the idea of the stork, she had responded as though to a great compliment. The Lord could testify, it hadn't been easy! How many, she wondered, would have fought as valiantly as she to protect the town's children from that most pernicious and evil encroachment of them all?

Sex education, indeed!

By all means, let us kill every last lovely dream; let us destroy the only trace of goodness and innocence in this wretched, guilty world!

Miss Maple twitched, vaguely aware that she was dozing. The word *sex* jarred her toward wakefulness, but *purity* pulled her back again. What a pity, in a way, she thought, that I was born so late. . . .

She had no idea what the thought meant; only that, for all the force of good she might be in Sand Hill, her battle was probably a losing one; and she was something of a dinosaur. In earlier, unquestionably better times, how different it would have been! Her purity would then have served a very real and necessary function, and would not have called down charges from the magazines that she was "hindering education." She might have been born in pre-Dynastian Egypt, for instance, and marched at the forefront of the court maidens toward some enormously important sacrifice. Or in the early Virginia, when the ladies were ladies and wore fifteen petticoats and were cherished because of it. Or in New England. In any time but this!

A sound brushed her ear.

She opened her eyes, watched a fat wren on a pipestem twig, and settled back to the half-sleep, deciding to dream a while now about Mr. Hennig and Sally Barnes. They had been meeting secretly after three o'clock, Miss Maple knew. She'd waited though, and taken her time, and then struck. And she'd caught them, in the basement, doing those unspeakable things.

Mr. Hennig would not be teaching school for a while now.

She stretched, almost invisible against the forest floor. The mouse-colored dress covered her like an embarrassed hand, concealing, not too successfully, the rounded hills of her breasts, keeping the secret of her slender waist and full hips, trailing down below the legs she hated because they were so smooth and white and shapely, down to the plain black leather shoes. Her face was pale and naked as a nun's, but the lips were large and moist, and the cheekbones high, and it did not look very much like a nun's face. Miss Maple fought her body and her face every morning, but she was not victorious. In spite of it all, and to her eternal dismay, she was an attractive woman.

The sound came again, and woke her.

It was not the fat bird and it was not the children. It was music. Like the music of flutes, very high-pitched and mellow, yet sharp; and though there was a melody, she could not recognize it.

Miss Maple shook her head, and listened.

The sound was real. It was coming from the forest, distant and far off, and if you did not shut out the other noises, you could scarcely hear it. But it was there.

Miss Maple rose, instantly alert, and brushed the leaves and pine needles away. For some reason, she felt a chill.

Why should there be music in a lost place like this?

She listened. The wind cooled through the trees and the piping sound seemed to be carried along with it, light as shadows. Three quick high notes; a pause; then a trill, like an infant's weeping; and a pause. Miss Maple shivered and started back to the field where the children were. She took three steps and did not take any more in that direction.

The music changed. Now it did not weep, and the notes were not so high-pitched. They were slow and sinuous, lower to the ground.

Imploring. Beckoning. . . .

Miss Maple turned and, without having the slightest notion why, began to walk into the thickness. The foliage was wet, glistening dark green, and it was not long before her thin dress was soaked in many places, but she understood that she must go on. She must find the person who was making such beautiful sounds.

In minutes she was surrounded by bushes, and the trail had vanished. She pushed branches aside, walked, listened.

The music grew louder. It grew nearer. But now it was fast, yelping and crying, and there was great urgency in it. Once, to Miss Maple's terror, it sounded, for a brief moment, like chuckling; still, there was no note that was not lonely, and sad.

She walked, marveling at her foolishness. It was, of course, not proper for a school teacher to go tumbling through the shrubbery, and she was a proper person. Besides—she stopped, and heard the beating of her heart—what if it were one of those horrid men who live on the banks of rivers and in woods and wait for women? She'd heard of such men.

The music became plaintive. It soothed her, told her not to be afraid; and some of the fear drained away.

She was coming closer, she knew. It had seemed vague and elusive before, now it thrummed in the air and encircled her.

Was there ever such lonely music?

She walked carefully across a webwork of stones. They protruded like small islands from the rushing brook, and the silver water looked very cold, but when her foot slipped and sank, she did not flinch.

The music grew impossibly loud. Miss Maple covered her ears with her hands, and could not still it. She listened and tried to run.

The notes rolled and danced in her mind: shrill screams and soft whispers and silences that pulsed and roared.

Beyond the trees.

Beyond the trees; another step; one more—

Miss Maple threw her hands out and parted the heavy green curtain.

The music stopped.

There was only the sound of the brook, and the wind, and her heart.

She swallowed and let the breath come out of her lungs. Then, slowly, she went through the shrubs and bushes, and rubbed her eyes.

She was standing in a grove. Slender saplings, spotted brown, undulated about her like the necks of restless giraffes, and beneath her feet there was soft golden grass, high and wild. The branches of the trees came together at the top to form a green dome. Sunlight speared the ground.

Miss Maple looked in every direction. Across the grove to the surrounding dark and shadowed woods, and to all sides. And saw nothing. Only the grass and the trees and the sunlight.

Then she sank to the earth and lay still, wondering why she felt such heat and such fear.

It was at this moment that she became conscious of it: one thing which her vision might deny, and her senses, but which she knew nonetheless to be.

She was not alone.

"Yes?" The word rushed up and then died before it could ever leave her mouth.

A rustle of leaves: tiny hands applauding.

"Who is it?"

A drum in her chest.

"Yes, *please*—who is it? Who's here?"

And silence.

Miss Maple put fisted fingers to her chin and stopped breathing. I'm not alone, she thought. I'm not alone.

No.

Did someone say that?

The terror built, and then she felt something else entirely that wasn't terror and wasn't fear, either. Something that started her trembling. She lay on the grass, trembling, while this new sensation washed over her, catching her up in great tides and filling her.

What was it? She tried to think. She'd known this feeling before, a very long time ago; years ago on a summer

night when the moon was a round, unblinking, huge and watchful eye, and that boy—John?—had stopped talking and touched her. And how strange it was then, wondering what his hands were going to do next. John! There's a big eye watching us; take me home, I'm afraid! I'm afraid, John.

If you don't take me home, I'll tell.

I'll tell them the thing you tried to do.

Miss Maple stiffened when she felt the nearness, and heard the laughter. Her eyes arced over the grove.

"Who's laughing?"

She rose to her feet. There was a new smell in the air. A coarse animal smell, like wet fur: hot and fetid, thick, heavy, rolling toward her, covering her.

Miss Maple screamed.

Then the pipes began, and the music was frenzied this time. In front of her, in back, to the sides of her; growing louder, growing faster, and faster. She heard it deep in her blood and when her body began to sway, rhythmically, she closed her eyes and fought and found she could do nothing.

Almost of their own volition, her legs moved in quick, graceful steps. She felt herself being carried over the grass, swiftly, light as a blown leaf—

"Stop!"

—swiftly, leaping and turning, to the shaded dell at the end of the grove.

Here, consumed with heat, she dropped to the softness, and breathed the animal air.

The music ceased.

A hand touched her, roughly.

She threw her arms over her face: "No. Please—"

"Miss Maple!"

She felt her hands reaching toward the top button of her dress.

"Miss Maple! What's the matter?"

An infinite moment; then, everything sliding, melting, like a vivid dream you will not remember. Miss Maple shook her head from side to side and stared up at a young boy with straw hair and wide eyes.

She pulled reality about her.

"You all right, Miss Maple?"

"Of course, William," she said. The smell was gone. The music was gone. It was a dream. "I was following a snake, you see—a chicken snake, to be exact: and a nice, long one, too—and I almost had it, but I twisted my ankle on one of the stones in the brook. That's why I called."

The boy said, "Wow."

"Unfortunately," Miss Maple continued, getting to her feet, "it escaped me. You don't happen to see it, do you, William?"

William said no, and she pretended to hobble back to the field.

At 4:19, after grading three groups of tests, Miss Maple put on her gray cotton coat and flat black hat and started for home. She was not exactly thinking about the incident in the forest, but Owen Tracy had to speak twice. He had been waiting.

"Miss Maple. Over here!"

She stopped, turned, and approached the blue car. The principal of Overton High was smiling: he was too handsome for his job, too tall and too young, and Miss Maple resented his eyes. They traveled. "Yes, Mr. Tracy?"

"Thought maybe you'd like a lift home."

"That is very nice of you," she said, "but I enjoy walking. It isn't far."

"Well, then, how about my walking along with you?"

Miss Maple flushed. "I—"

"Like to talk with you, off the record." The tall man got out of his car, locked it.

"Not, I hope, about the same subject."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry. I have nothing further to add."

Owen Tracy fell into step. His face was still pleasant, and it was obvious that he intended to retain his good humor, his charm. "I suppose you read Ben Sugrue's piece in the *Sun-Mirror* yesterday?"

Miss Maple said, "No," perfunctorily. Sugrue was a monster, a libertine: it was he who had started the campaign, whose gross libidinous whispers had first swept the town.

"It refers to Overton High as a medieval fortress."

"Indeed? Well," Miss Maple said, "perhaps that's so."

She smiled, delicately. "It was, I believe, a medieval fortress that saved the lives of four hundred people during the time of the Black Plague."

Tracy stopped a moment to light a cigarette. "Very good," he conceded. "You're an intelligent person, Lydia. Intelligent and sharp."

"Thank you."

"And that's what puzzles me. This mess over the sex-education program isn't intelligent and it isn't sharp. It's foolish. As a biology teacher you ought to know that."

Miss Maple was silent.

"If we were an elementary school," Tracy said, "well, maybe your idea would make sense. I personally don't think so, but at least you'd have a case. In a high school, though, it's silly; and it's making a laughing stock out of us. If I know Sugrue, he'll keep hammering until one of the national magazines picks it up. And that will be bad."

Miss Maple did not change her expression. "My stand," she said, "ought to be perfectly clear by now, Mr. Tracy. In the event it isn't, let me tell you again. There will be no sex-education program at Overton so long as I am in charge of the biology department. I consider the suggestion vile and unspeakable—and quite impractical—and am not to be persuaded otherwise: neither by yourself, nor by that journalist, nor by the combined efforts of the faculty. Because, Mr. Tracy, I feel a responsibility toward my students. Not only to fill their minds with biological data, but to protect them, also." Her voice was even. "If you wish to take action, of course, you are at liberty to do so—"

"I wouldn't want to do that," Owen Tracy said. He seemed to be struggling with his calm.

"I think that's wise," Miss Maple said. She paused and stared at the principal.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Simply that any measures to interrupt or impede my work, or force changes upon the present curriculum, will prove embarrassing, Mr. Tracy, both to yourself and to Overton." She noticed his fingers and how they were curling.

"Go on."

"I hardly think that's necessary."

"I do. Go on, please."

"I may be . . . old-fashioned," she said, "but I am not stupid. Nor am I unobservant. I happen to have learned some of the facts concerning yourself and Miss Bond . . ."

Owen Tracy's calm fled like a released animal. Anger began to twitch along his temples. "I see."

They looked at one another for a while; then the principal turned and started back in the opposite direction. The fire had gone out of his eyes. After a few steps, he turned again and said, "It may interest you to know that Miss Bond and I are going to be married at the end of the term."

"I wonder why," Miss Maple said, and left the tall man standing in the bloody twilight.

She felt a surge of exultation as she went up the stairs of her apartment. Of course she'd known nothing about them, only guessed: but when you think the worst of people, you're seldom disappointed. It had been true, after all. And now her position was absolutely unassailable.

She opened cans and bottles and packages and prepared her usual supper. Then, when the dishes were done, she read Richards' *Practical Criticism* until nine o'clock. At nine-thirty she tested the doors to see that they were securely locked, drew the curtains, fastened the windows and removed her clothes, hanging them carefully in the one small closet.

The gown she chose was white cotton, chin-high and ankle-low, faintly figured with tiny fleur-de-lis. For a brief moment her naked body was exposed; then, at once, covered up again, wrapped, encased, sealed.

Miss Maple lay in the bed, her mind untroubled.

But sleep would not come.

She got up after a while and warmed some milk; still she could not sleep. Unidentifiable thoughts came, disturbing her. Unnormal sensations. A feeling that was not proper. . . .

Then she heard the music.

The pipes: the high-pitched, dancing pipes of the afternoon, so distant now that she felt perhaps she was imagining them, so real she knew that couldn't be true. They were real.

She became frightened, when the music did not stop,

and reached for the telephone. But what person would she call? And what would she say?

Miss Maple decided to ignore the sounds, and the hot strange feeling that was creeping upon her alone in her bed.

She pressed the pillow tight against her ears, and held it there, and almost screamed when she saw that her legs were moving apart slowly, beyond her will.

The heat in her body grew. It was a flame, the heat of high fevers, moist and interior: not a warmth.

And it would not abate.

She threw the covers off and began to pace the room, hands clenched. The music came through the locked windows.

Miss Maple!

She remembered things, without remembering them.

She fought another minute, very hard; then surrendered. Without knowing why, she ran to the closet and removed her gray coat and put it on over the nightgown; then she opened a bureau drawer and pocketed a ring of keys, ran out the front door, down the hall, her naked feet silent upon the thick-piled carpet, and into the garage where it was dark. The music played fast, her heart beat fast, and she moaned softly when the seldom-used automobile sat cold and unresponding to her touch.

At last it came to life, when she thought she must go out of her mind; and Miss Maple shuddered at the dry coughs and violent starts and black explosions.

In moments she was out of town, driving faster than she had ever driven, pointed toward the wine-dark waters of the gulf. The highway turned beneath her in a blur and sometimes, on the curves, she heard the shocked and painful cry of the tires, and felt the car slide; but it didn't matter. Nothing mattered, except the music.

Though her eyes were blind, she found the turn-off, and soon she was hurtling across the white path of shells, so fast that there was a wake behind her; then, scant yards from the restless stream, she brought her foot down hard upon the brake pedal, and the car danced to a stop.

Miss Maple rushed out because now the piping was inside her, and ran across the path into the field and across the field into the trees and through the trees, stumbling

and falling and getting up again, not feeling the cold sharp fingers of brush tearing at her and the high wet grass soaking her and the thousand stones daggering her flesh, feeling only the pumping of her heart and the music, calling and calling.

There! The brook was cold, but she was across it, and past the wall of foliage. And there! The grove, moon-silvered and waiting.

Miss Maple tried to pause and rest; but the music would not let her do this. Heat enveloped her: she removed the coat; ate her: she tore the tiny pearl buttons of her gown and pulled the gown over her head and threw it to the ground.

It did no good. Proper Miss Lydia Maple stood there, while the wind lifted her hair and sent it billowing like shreds of amber silk, and felt the burning and listened to the pipes.

Dance! they told her. Dance tonight, Miss Maple: now. It's easy. You remember. Dance!

She began to sway then, and her legs moved, and soon she was leaping over the tall grass, whirling and pirouetting.

Like this?

Like that, Miss Maple. Yes, like that!

She danced until she could dance no more, then she stopped by the first tree by the end of the grove, and waited for the music to stop as she knew it would.

The forest became silent.

Miss Maple smelled the goatly animal smell and felt it coming closer; she lay against the tree and squinted her eyes, but there was nothing to see, only shadows.

She waited.

There was a laugh, a wild shriek of amusement; bull-like and heavily masculine it was, but wild as no man's laugh ever could be. And then the sweaty fur odor was upon her, and she experienced a strength about her, and there was breath against her face, hot as steam.

"Yes," she said, and hands touched her, hurting with fierce pain.

"Yes!" and she felt glistening muscles beneath her fingers, and a weight upon her, a shaggy, tawny weight

that was neither ghost nor human nor animal, but with much heat; hot as the fires that blazed inside her.

"Yes," said Miss Maple, parting her lips. "Yes! *Yes!*"

The change in Lydia Maple thenceforth was noticed by some but not marked, for she hid it well. Owen Tracy would stare at her sometimes, and sometimes the other teachers would wonder to themselves why she should be looking so tired so much of the time; but since she did not say or do anything specifically different, it was left a small mystery.

When some of the older boys said that they had seen Miss Maple driving like a bat out of hell down the gulf highway at two in the morning, they were quickly silenced: for such a thing was, on the face of it, too absurd for consideration.

The girls of her classes were of the opinion that Miss Maple looked happier than she had ever been, but this was attributed to her victory over the press and the principal's wishes on the matter of sex-education.

To Mr. Owen Tracy, it seemed to be a distasteful subject for conversation all the way around. He was in full agreement with the members of the school board that progress at Overton would begin only when Miss Maple was removed: but in order to remove her, one would have to have grounds. Sufficient grounds, at that, for there was the business of himself and Lorraine Bond. . . .

As for Miss Maple, she developed the facility of detachment to a fine degree. A week went by and she answered the call of the pipes without fail—though going about it in a more orderly manner—and still, wondering vaguely about the spattered mud on her legs, about the grass stains and bits of leaves and fresh twigs, she did not actually believe that any of it was happening. It was fantastic, and fantasy had no place in Miss Maple's life.

She would awaken each morning satisfied that she had had another unusual dream; then she would forget it, and go about her business.

It was on a Monday—the night of the day that she had assembled positive proof that Willie Hammacher and Rosalia Forbes were cutting classes together and stealing away to Dauphin Park; and submitted this proof; and

had Willie and Rosalia threatened with expulsion from school—that Miss Maple scented her body with perfumes, lay down and waited, again, for the music.

She waited, tremulous as usual, aching beneath the temporary sheets; but the air was still.

He's late, she thought, and tried to sleep. Often she would sit up, though, certain that she had heard it, and once she got halfway across the room toward the closet; and sleep was impossible.

She stared at the ceiling until three A.M., listening.

Then she rose and dressed and got into her car.

She went to the grove.

She stood under the crescent moon, under the bruised sky.

And heard the wind; her heart; owls high in the trees; the shifting currents of the stream; the stony rustle of the brook; and heard the forest quiet.

Tentatively, she took off her clothes, and stacked them in a neat pile.

She raised her arms from her sides and tried a few steps. They were awkward. She stopped, embarrassed.

"Where are you?" she whispered.

Silence.

"I'm here," she whispered.

Then, she heard the chuckling: it was cruel and hearty, but not mirthless.

Over here, Miss Maple.

She smiled and ran to the middle of the grove. Here?

No, Miss Maple: over here! You're looking beautiful tonight. And hungry. Why don't you dance?

The laughter came from the trees, to the right. She ran to it. It disappeared. It appeared again, from the trees to the left.

What can you be after, madame? It's hardly proper, you know. Miss Maple, where are your clothes?

She covered her breasts with her hands, and knew fear. "Don't," she said. "Please, don't." The aching and the awful heat were in her. "Come out! I want—"

"You want—?"

Miss Maple went from tree to tree, blindly. She ran until pain clutched at her legs, and, by the shadowed dell, she sank exhausted.

There was one more sound. A laugh. It faded. And everything became suddenly very still and quiet. Miss Maple looked down and saw that she was naked. It shocked her. It shocked her, also, to become aware that she was Lydia Maple, thirty-seven, teacher of biology at Overton.

"Where are you?" she cried.

The wind felt cold upon her body. Her feet were cold among the grasses. She knew a hunger and a longing that were unbearable.

"Come to me," she said, but her voice was soft and hopeless.

She was alone in the wood now.

And this was the way it had been meant.

She put her face against the rough bark of the tree and wept for the first time in her life. Because she knew that there was no more music for her, there would never be any music for her again.

Miss Maple went to the grove a few more times, late at night, desperately hoping it was not true. But her blood thought for her: What it was, or who it was, that played the pipes so sweetly in the wooded place would play no more; of that she was sure. She did not know why. And it gave her much pain for many hours, and sleep was difficult, but there was nothing to be done.

Her body considered seeking out someone in the town, and rejected the notion. For what good was a man when one had been loved by a god?

In time she forgot everything, because she had to forget.

The music, the dancing, the fire, the feel of strong arms about her: everything.

And she might have gone on living quietly, applauding purity, battling the impure, and holding the Beast of Worldliness outside the gates of Sand Hill forever—if a strange thing had not happened.

It happened in a small way.

During dinner one evening Miss Maple found herself craving things. It had been a good day, she had found proof that the rumors about Mr. Etlin, the English I teacher, were true—he did indeed subscribe to that dreadful magazine; and Owen Tracy was thinking of transfer-

ring to another school; yet, as she sat there in her apartment, alone, content, she was hungry for things.

First it was ice cream. Big plates of strawberry ice cream topped with marshmallow sauce.

Then it was wine.

And then Miss Maple began to crave grass. . . .

Nobody ever did find out why she moved away from Sand Hill in such a hurry, or where she went, or what happened to her.

But then, nobody cared.

Fair Lady

"GO TO MEXICO, ELOUISE," THEY HAD TOLD HER. "You'll find him there." So she had gone to Mexico and searched the little dry villages and the big dry cities, searched carefully; but she did not find him. So she left Mexico and came home.

Then they said, "Paris! That's the place he'll be. Only, hurry, Elouise! It's getting late." But Paris was across an ocean: it didn't exist, except in young girls' hearts and old women's minds, and if she were to see him there, a *boulevardier*, a gay charmer with a wine bottle—no, they were wrong. He wasn't in Paris.

In fact—it came to her one day in class, when the sun was not bright and autumn was a dead cold thing outside—Duane wasn't anywhere. She knew this to be true because a young man with golden hair and smooth cheeks was standing up reading *Agamemnon*, and she listened *and did not dream*.

She did not even think of Duane—or, as it may have been, Michael or William or Gregory.

She went home after grading the papers and thought and tried to recall his features. Then she looked about her room, almost, it seemed, for the first time: at the faded orange wallpaper, the darkwood chiffonier, the thin rows of books turned gray and worn by gentle handling over the years. The years . . .

She discovered her wrists and the trailing spongy blue veins, the tiny wrinkled skin that was no longer taut about the hands; and her face, she studied it, too, in the mirror, and saw the face the mirror gave back to her. Not ugly, not hard, but . . . unbeautiful, and old. And what is a thing, after all, when it is no longer young, if it is not old?

She searched, pulled out memories from the cedar chest, and listened in the quiet room to her heart. But

he was not there, the tall stranger who waited to love her, only her, Miss Elouise Baker, and she knew now that he never would be. Because he never was.

It was on that night that Miss Elouise wept softly for death to come and take her away.

And it was on the next morning that she met, and fell in love with, Mr. Oliver O'Shaugnessy.

It happened this way. Miss Elouise was seated at the bus stop waiting for the 7:25, seated there as on years of other mornings; only now she thought of death whereas before she'd thought of life, full and abundant. She was an elderly schoolteacher now, dried-up and desiccated, like Mrs. Ritter or Miss Ackwright; cold in the morning air, unwarmed by dreams, cold and heavy-lidded from a night of staring, frightened, into darkness. She sat alone, waiting for the 7:25.

It came out of the mist with ponderous grace, its old motor loud with the cold. It rumbled down the street, then swerved and groaned to a stop before the triangular yellow sign. The doors hissed open and it paused, breathing heavily.

But Miss Elouise stared right into the red paint, sat and stared in the noise and the smoke and didn't move at all or even blink.

The voice came to her soft and unalarmed, almost soothing:

"You wouldn't be sitting there thinking up ways to keep the kiddies after school, would you?"

She looked up and saw the driver.

"I'm sorry. I . . . must have dozed off."

She got inside and began to walk to her seat, the one she'd occupied every morning for a million years.

Then it happened. A rushing into existence, a running, a being. Later she tried to remember her impressions of the surrounding few seconds. She recalled that the bus was empty of passengers. That the advertising signs up above had been changed. That the floor had not been properly swept out. Willed or unwilling, it happened then, at the moment she reached her seat and the doors hissed closed. With these words it happened:

Fair Lady.

"What did you say?"

"Unless you're under twelve years of age, which you'd have a hard time persuading me of, miss, I'll have to ask the company's rightful fare." Then gently, softly, like the laughter of elves: "It's a wicked, money-minded world, and me probably the worst of all, but that's what makes it spin."

Miss Elouise looked at the large red-faced man in the early-morning fresh uniform creased from the iron and crisp. The cap, tilted back over the gray locks of hair; the chunks of flesh straining the clothes tight and rolling out over the belt; at the big, broad, burly man behind the wheel who smiled at her with his eyes. She looked at Oliver O'Shaugnessy, whom she'd seen before and before and never seen before this moment.

Then she dropped a dime into the old-fashioned black coin box and sat down.

But not in her usual seat. She sat down in the seat first back from the man who'd said Fair Lady when it took just those words out of a fat dictionary of words to bring her to life.

That's how it happened. As mysteriously, as unreasonably as any great love has ever happened. And Miss Elouise, from that time on, didn't question or doubt or, for that matter, even think about it much. She just accepted.

And it made the old dream an embarrassed little thing. A pale, dated matinee illusion—she couldn't even bear to think of it, now, with its randy smell of shieks on horseback and dark strangers from a cardboard nowhere. Duane . . . what an effete ass *he* turned out to be, and to think: she might actually have met him and been crushed and forsaken and forever lost. . . .

Now, she could once again take up her interest in books and art and music, and, in a little while, it all came—she was loving her job—loving it. And before, she'd hated it with her soul. Since falling in love with Oliver O'Shaugnessy, these things were hers. She grew young and healthy and wore a secret smile wherever she went.

Every morning, then, Miss Elouise would hurry to the bus stop and wait while her heart rattled fast. And, sure enough, the bus would come and it would be empty—

most of the time, anyway: when it was not empty, she felt that intruders or in-laws had moved in for a visit. But, mostly it was empty.

For thirty minutes every morning, she would live years of life. And slowly, deliciously, she came to know Oliver as well as to love him. He grew dearer to her as she found, each day, new sides to him, new facets of his great personality. For example, his moods became more readily apparent, though hidden behind the smile he always wore for her: she came to know his moods. On some days he felt perfectly wretched; on others, tired and vaguely disturbed; still other days found him bursting with spring cheer, happy as a fed child. Once, even, Oliver was deeply introspective and his smile was weary and forced as he revolved the large wedding ring on his third finger left hand. Through all, he changed and broadened and grew tall, and she loved him with all her heart.

Of course she never spoke of these things. Ever. In fact, they conversed practically not at all. He had no way of guessing the truth, though at times Miss Elouise thought perhaps he did.

Together, it was perfect. And what more can be said?

For three years Miss Elouise rode with Oliver O'Shaugnessy, her lover, every morning, every morning without fail. Except for that awful day each week when he did not work—and these were dark, empty days, full of longing. But they passed. And it gave such wings to her spirit that she felt truly no one in the world could be quite so happy. Fulfillment there was, and quiet contentment. No wife in bed with her husband had ever known one tenth this intimacy; no youngsters in the country under August stars had ever come near to the romance that was hers; nor had ever a woman known such felicity, unspoken, undemanded, but so richly there.

For three magic years. And who could speak with her about love and be on fair ground?

Then, there came a morning. A morning cold as the one of years before, when she had thought of death, and Miss Elouise felt a chill enter her heart and lodge there. She glanced at her watch and looked at the street,

misted and empty and wet gray. It was not late, it was not Oliver's day off, nothing had happened—therefore, why should she be afraid? Nevertheless, she was afraid.

The bus came. It swung around the corner far ahead and rolled toward her and came to its stop and, without thinking or looking, she got on.

And saw.

Oliver O'Shaugnessy was not there.

A strange young man with blond hair and thick glasses sat at the wheel. Miss Elouise felt everything loosen and break apart and start to drift off. She was terrified, suddenly, frozen like a china figurine, and she did not even try to move or understand.

It was not merely that something had been taken—as her father had been taken, her father whom she loved so very much. Not merely that. It was knowing, all at once, that she *herself* was being taken, pushed out of a world she'd believed in and told to stay away.

Once she'd known a woman who was insane. They would say to this woman, "You were walking through the house last night, and laughing," and the woman, who never laughed, she wouldn't remember and her eyes would widen in fear and she would say, later, in a lost voice: "I wonder what I could have been laughing at. . . ."

There was a throaty noise, a loud cough.

"Who are you?" Miss Elouise said.

"Beg pardon?" the young man said.

"Where is Oliver?"

"O'Shaugnessy? Got transferred. Takes the Randolphe route now."

Transferred. . . .

Miss Elouise felt that a cageful of little black ugly birds had suddenly been released and that they beat their wings against her heart. She remembered the loneliness and how the loneliness had died and been replaced with something good and clean and fine and built of every lovely dream in all the world.

She got off the bus at the next stop and went home and thought all that day and into the night. Very late into the night . . .

Then, the birds went away.

She smiled, as she had been smiling for these three years, and, when the morning came again, she made a telephone call. Retirement—for Miss Elouise? Why certainly she was due it, but—

She worked busily as a housewife, packing, moving, setting straight the vacant room, telling her goodbyes.

It took time. But not much, really, and she worked so fast and so hard she had little time to think. The days flew.

And then it was done.

And, smiling, she sat one morning in new air, on a new corner two blocks from her new home, and she waited for the bus.

And presently, as lovers will, her lover came to her.

Perchance to Dream

"PLEASE SIT DOWN," THE PSYCHIATRIST SAID, INDICATING a somewhat worn leather couch.

Automatically, Hall sat down. Instinctively, he leaned back. Dizziness flooded through him, his eyelids fell like sashweights, the blackness came. He jumped up quickly and slapped his right cheek, then he slapped his left cheek, hard.

"I'm sorry, Doctor," he said.

The psychiatrist, who was tall and young and not in the least Viennese, nodded. "You prefer to stand?" he asked gently.

"Prefer?" Hall threw his head back and laughed. "That's good," he said. "*Prefer!*"

"I'm afraid I don't quite understand."

"Neither do I, Doctor." He pinched the flesh of his left hand until it hurt. "No, no: that isn't true. I do understand. That's the whole trouble. I do."

"You—want to tell me about it?"

"Yes. No." It's silly, he thought. You can't help me. No one can. I'm alone! "Forget it," he said and started for the door.

The psychiatrist said, "Wait a minute." His voice was friendly, concerned; but not patronizing. "Running away won't do you much good, will it?"

Hall hesitated.

"Forgive the cliché. Actually, running away is often the best answer. But I don't know yet that yours is that sort of problem."

"Did Dr. Jackson tell you about me?"

"No. Jim said he was sending you over, but he thought you'd do a better job on the details. I only know that your name is Philip Hall, you're thirty-one, and you haven't been able to sleep for a long time."

"Yes. A long time . . ." To be exact, seventy-two

hours, Hall thought, glancing at the clock. Seventy-two horrible hours . . .

The psychiatrist tapped out a cigarette. "Aren't you—" he began.

"Tired? God yes. I'm the tiredest man on earth! I could sleep forever. But that's just it, you see: I would. I'd never wake up."

"Please," the psychiatrist said.

Hall bit his lip. There wasn't, he supposed, much point to it. But, after all, what *else* was there for him to do? Where would he go? "You mind if I pace?"

"Stand on your head, if you like."

"Okay. I'll take one of your cigarettes." He drew the smoke into his lungs and walked over to the window. Fourteen floors below, the toy people and the toy cars moved. He watched them and thought, this guy's all right. Sharp. Intelligent. Nothing like what I expected. Who can say—*maybe* it'll do some good. "I'm not sure where to begin."

"It doesn't matter. The beginning might be easier for you."

Hall shook his head, violently. The beginning, he thought. Was there such a thing?

"Just take it easy."

After a lengthy pause, Hall said: "I first found out about the power of the human mind when I was ten. Close to that time, anyway. We had a tapestry in the bedroom. It was a great big thing, the size of a rug, with fringe on the edges. It showed a group of soldiers—Napoleonic soldiers—on horses. They were at the brink of some kind of cliff, and the first horse was reared up. My mother told me something. She told me that if I stared at the tapestry long enough, the horses would start to move. They'd go right over the cliff, she said. I tried it, but nothing happened. She said, 'You've got to *think* about it.' So every night, before I went to bed, I'd sit up and stare at that damn tapestry. And finally, it happened. Over they went, all the horses, all the men, over the edge of the cliff . . ." Hall stubbed out the cigarette and began to pace. "Scared hell out of me," he said. "When I looked again, they were all back. It got to be a game with me. Later on, I tried it with pictures in maga-

zines, and pretty soon I was able to move locomotives and send balloons flying and make dogs open their mouths: everything, anything I wanted.

He paused, ran a hand through his hair. "Not too unusual, you're thinking," he said. "Every kid does it. Like standing in a closet and shining a flashlight through your finger, or sewing up the heel of your palm . . . common stuff?"

The psychiatrist shrugged.

"There was a difference," Hall said. "One day it got out of control. I was looking at a coloring book. One of the pictures showed a knight and a dragon fighting. For fun I decided to make the knight drop his lance. He did. The dragon started after him, breathing fire. In another second the dragon's mouth was open and he was getting ready to eat the knight. I blinked and shook my head, like always, only—nothing happened. I mean, the picture didn't 'go back.' Not even when I closed the book and opened it again. But I didn't think too much about it, even then."

He walked to the desk and took another cigarette. It slipped from his hands.

"You've been on Dexedrine," the psychiatrist said, watching as Hall tried to pick up the cigarette.

"Yes."

"How many grains a day?"

"Thirty, thirty-five, I don't know."

"Potent. Knocks out your co-ordination. I suppose Jim warned you?"

"Yes, he warned me."

"Well, let's get along. What happened then?"

"Nothing," Hall allowed the psychiatrist to light his cigarette. "For a while, I forgot about the 'game' almost completely. Then, when I turned thirteen, I got sick. Rheumatic heart—"

The psychiatrist leaned forward and frowned. "And Jim let you have thirty-five—"

"Don't interrupt!" He decided not to mention that he had gotten the drug from his aunt, that Dr. Jackson knew nothing about it. "I had to stay in bed a lot. No activity; might kill me. So I read books and listened to the radio. One night I heard a ghost story. 'Hermit's

Cave' it was called. All about a man who gets drowned and comes back to haunt his wife. My parents were gone, at a movie. I was alone. And I kept thinking about that story, imagining the ghost. Maybe, I thought to myself, he's in that closet. I knew he wasn't; I knew there wasn't any such thing as a ghost, really. But there was a little part of my mind that kept saying, 'Look at the closet. Watch the door. He's in there, Philip, and he's going to come out.' I picked up a book and tried to read, but I couldn't help glancing at the closet door. It was open a crack. Everything dark behind it. Everything dark and quiet."

"And the door moved."

"That's right."

"You understand that there's nothing terribly unusual in anything you've said so far?"

"I know," Hall said. "It was my imagination. It *was*, and I realized it even then. But—I got just as scared. Just as scared as if a ghost actually *had* opened that door! And that's the whole point. The mind, Doctor. It's everything. If you *think* you have a pain in your arm and there's no physical reason for it, you don't hurt any less . . . My mother died because she thought she had a fatal disease. The autopsy showed malnutrition, nothing else. But she died just the same!"

"I won't dispute the point."

"All right. I just don't want you to tell me it's all in my mind. I *know* it is."

"Go on."

"They told me I'd never really get well, I'd have to take it easy the rest of my life. Because of the heart. No strenuous exercise, no stairs, no long walks. No shocks. Shock produces excessive adrenalin, they said. Bad. So that's the way it was. When I got out of school, I grabbed a soft desk job. Unexciting: numbers, adding numbers, that's all. Things went okay for a few years. Then it started again. I read about where some woman got into her car at night and happened to check for something in the back seat and found a man hidden there. Waiting. It stuck with me; I started dreaming about it. So every night, when I got into my car, I automatically patted the rear seat and floorboards. It satisfied me for a while, until I

started thinking, 'What if I forget to check?' Or, 'What if there's something back there that isn't human?' I had to drive across Laurel Canyon to get home, and you know how twisty that stretch is. Thirty-fifty-foot drops, straight down. I'd get this feeling halfway across. 'There's someone . . . something . . . in the back of the car!' Hidden, in darkness. Fat and shiny. I'll look in the rear-view mirror and I'll see his hands ready to circle my throat . . . Again, Doctor: understand me. *I knew it was my imagination.* I had no doubt at all that the back seat was empty—hell, I kept the car locked and I double-checked! But, I told myself, you keep thinking this way, Hall, and you'll see those hands. It'll be a reflection, or somebody's headlights, or nothing at all—but you'll see them! Finally, one night, I did see them! The car lurched a couple of times and went down the embankment."

The psychiatrist said, "Wait a minute," rose, and switched the tape on a small machine.

"I knew how powerful the mind was, then," Hall continued. "I know that ghosts and demons did exist, they did, if you only thought about them long enough and hard enough. After all, one of them almost killed me!" He pressed the lighted end of the cigarette against his flesh; the fog lifted instantly. "Dr. Jackson told me afterwards that one more serious shock like that would finish me. And that's when I started having the dream."

There was a silence in the room, compounded of distant automobile horns, the ticking of the ship's-wheel clock, the insectival tapping of the receptionist's typewriter, Hall's own tortured breathing.

"They say dreams last only a couple of seconds," he said. "I don't know whether that's true or not. It doesn't matter. They *seem* to last longer. Sometimes I've dreamed a whole lifetime; sometimes generations have passed. Once in a while, time stops completely; it's a frozen moment, lasting forever. When I was a kid I saw the Flash Gordon serials; you remember? I loved them, and when the last episode was over, I went home and started dreaming more. Each night, another episode. They were vivid, too, and I remembered them when I woke up. I even wrote them down, to make sure I wouldn't forget. Crazy?"

"No," said the psychiatrist.

"I did, anyway. The same thing happened with the Oz books and the Burroughs books. I'd keep them going. But after the age of fifteen, or so, I didn't dream much. Only once in a while. Then, a week ago—" Hall stopped talking. He asked the location of the bathroom and went there and splashed cold water on his face. Then he returned and stood by the window.

"A week ago?" the psychiatrist said, flipping the tape machine back on.

"I went to bed around eleven thirty. I wasn't too tired, but I needed the rest, on account of my heart. Right away the dream started. I was walking along Venice Pier. It was close to midnight. The place was crowded, people everywhere; you know the kind they used to get there. Sailors, dumpy looking dames, kids in leather jackets. The pitchmen were going through their routines. You could hear the roller coasters thundering along the tracks, the people inside the roller coasters, screaming; you could hear the bells and the guns cracking and the crazy songs they play on calliopes. And, far away, the ocean, moving. Everything was bright and gaudy and cheap. I walked for a while, stepping on gum and candy apples, wondering why I was there." Hall's eyes closed. He opened them quickly and rubbed them. "Halfway to the end, passing the penny arcade, I saw a girl. She was about twenty-two or -three. White dress, very thin and tight, and a funny white hat. Her legs were bare, nicely muscled and tan. She was alone. I stopped and watched her, and I remember thinking, 'She *must* have a boy friend. He *must* be here somewhere.' But she didn't seem to be waiting for anyone, or looking. Unconsciously, I began to follow her. At a distance.

"She walked past a couple of concessions, then she stopped at one called 'The Whip' and strolled in and went for a ride. The air was hot. It caught her dress as she went around and sent it whirling. It didn't bother her at all. She just held onto the bar and closed her eyes, and—I don't know, a kind of ecstasy seemed to come over her. She began to laugh. A high-pitched, musical sound. I stood by the fence and watched her, wondering why such a beautiful girl would be laughing in a cheap

carnival ride, in the middle of the night, all by herself. Then my hands froze on the fence, because suddenly I saw that she was looking at me. Every time the car would whip around, she'd be looking. And there was something in her eyes, something that said, Don't go away, don't leave, don't move . . .

"The ride stopped and she got out and walked over to me. As naturally as if we'd known each other for years, she put her arm in mine, and said, 'We've been expecting you, Mr. Hall.' Her voice was deep and soft, and her face, close up, was even more beautiful than it had seemed. Full, rich lips, a little wet; dark, flashing eyes; a warm gleam to her flesh. I didn't answer. She laughed again and tugged at my sleeve. 'Come on, darling,' she said. 'We haven't much time.' And we walked almost running, to The Silver Flash—a roller coaster, the highest on the pier. I knew I shouldn't go on it because of my heart condition, but she wouldn't listen. She said I had to, for her. So we bought our tickets and got into the first seat of the car . . ."

Hall held his breath for a moment, then let it out, slowly. As he relived the episode, he found that it was easier to stay awake. Much easier.

"That," he said, "was the end of the first dream. I woke up sweating and trembling, and thought about it most of the day, wondering where it had all come from. I'd only been to Venice Pier once in my life, with my mother. Years ago. But that night, just as it'd happened with the serials, the dream picked up exactly where it had left off. We were settling into the seat. Rough leather, cracked and peeling, I recall. The grab bar iron, painted black, the paint rubbed away in the center.

"I tried to get out, thinking, Now's the time to do it; do it now or you'll be too late! But the girl held me, and whispered to me. We'd be together, she said. Close together. If I'd do this one thing for her, she'd belong to me. 'Please! Please!' Then the car started. A little jerk; the kids beginning to yell and scream; the *clack-clack* of the chain pulling up; and up, slowly, too late now, too late for anything, up the steep wooden hill . . .

"A third of the way to the top, with her holding me, pressing herself against me, I woke up again. Next night,

we went up a little farther. Next night, a little farther. Foot by foot, slowly, up the hill. At the halfway point, the girl began kissing me. And laughing. 'Look down!' she told me. 'Look down, Philip!' And I did and saw little people and little cars and everything tiny and unreal.

"Finally we were within a few feet of the crest. The night was black and the wind was fast and cold now, and I was scared, so scared that I couldn't move. The girl laughed louder than ever, and a strange expression came into her eyes. I remembered then how no one else had noticed her. How the ticket-taker had taken the two stubs and looked around questioningly.

"'Who are you?' I screamed. And she said, 'Don't you know?' And she stood up and pulled the grab-bar out of my hands. I leaned forward to get it.

"Then we reached the top. And I saw her face and I knew what she was going to do, instantly: I knew. I tried to get back into the seat, but I felt her hands on me then and I heard her voice, laughing, high, laughing and shrieking with delight, and—"

Hall smashed his fist against the wall, stopped and waited for calm to return.

When it did, he said, "That's the whole thing, Doctor. Now you know why I don't dare to go to sleep. When I do—and I'll have to, eventually; I realize that!—the dream will go on. And my heart won't take it!"

The psychiatrist pressed a button on his desk.

"Whoever she is," Hall went on, "she'll push me. And I'll fall. Hundreds of feet. I'll see the cement rushing up in a blur to meet me and I'll feel the first horrible pain of contact—"

There was a click.

The office door opened.

A girl walked in.

"Miss Thomas," the psychiatrist began, "I'd like you to—"

Philip Hall screamed. He stared at the girl in the white nurse's uniform and took a step backward. "Oh, Christ! No!"

"Mr. Hall, this is my receptionist, Miss Thomas."

"No," Hall cried. "It's her. It is. And I know who she is now, God save me! I know who she is!"

The girl in the white uniform took a tentative step into the room.

Hall screamed again, threw his hands over his face, turned and tried to run.

A voice called, "Stop him!"

Hall felt the sharp pain of the sill against his knee, realized in one hideous moment what was happening. Blindly he reached out, grasping. But it was too late. As if drawn by a giant force, he tumbled through the open window, out into the cold clear air.

"Hall!"

All the way down, all the long and endless way down past the thirteen floors to the gray, unyielding, hard concrete, his mind worked; and his eyes never closed . . .

"I'm afraid he's dead," the psychiatrist said, removing his fingers from Hall's wrist.

The girl in the white uniform made a little gasping sound. "But," she said, "only a minute ago, I saw him and he was—"

"I know. It's funny; when he came in, I told him to sit down. He did. And in less than two seconds he was asleep. Then he gave that yell you heard and . . ."

"Heart attack?"

"Yes." The psychiatrist rubbed his cheek thoughtfully. "Well," he said, "I guess there are worse ways to go. At least he died peacefully."

The Crooked Man

"Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools . . . who changed the truth of God into a lie . . . for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature: and likewise also the men, leaving the natural use of the woman, burned in their lust one toward another; men with men working that which is unseemly . . ."

—St. Paul: Romans, 1

HE SLIPPED INTO A CORNER BOOTH AWAY FROM THE dancing men, where it was quietest, where the odors of musk and frangipani hung less heavy on the air. A slender lamp glowed softly in the booth. He turned it down: down to where only the club's blue overheads filtered through the beaded curtain, diffusing, blurring the image thrown back by the mirrored walls of his light, thinboned handsomeness.

"Yes sir?" The barboy stepped through the beads and stood smiling. Clad in gold-sequined trunks, his greased muscles seemed to roll in independent motion, like fat snakes beneath his naked skin.

"Whiskey," Jesse said. He caught the insouciant grin, the broad white-tooth crescent that formed on the young man's face. Jesse looked away, tried to control the flow of blood to his cheeks.

"Yes sir," the barboy said, running his thick tanned fingers over his solar plexus, tapping the fingers, making them hop in a sinuous dance. He hesitated, still smiling, this time questioningly, hopefully, a smile deep drenched in admiration and desire. The Finger Dance, the accepted symbol, stopped: the pudgy brown digits curled into angry fists. "Right away, sir."

Jesse watched him turn; before the beads had tinkled together he watched the handsome athlete make his way imperiously through the crowd, shaking off the tentative hands of single men at the tables, ignoring the many desire symbols directed toward him.

That shouldn't have happened. Now the fellow's feelings were hurt. If hurt enough, he would start thinking, wondering—and that would ruin everything. No. It must be put right.

Jesse thought of Mina, of the beautiful Mina— It was such a rotten chance. It *had* to go right!

"Your whiskey, sir," the young man said. His face looked like a dog's face, large, sad; his lips were a pouting bloat of line.

Jesse reached into his pocket for some change. He started to say something, something nice.

"It's been paid for," the barboy said. He scowled and laid a card on the table and left.

The card carried the name E. J. TWO HOBART, embossed, in lavender ink. Jesse heard the curtains tinkle.

"Well, hello. I hope you don't mind my barging in like this, but—you didn't seem to be with anyone . . ."

The man was small, chubby, bald; his face had a dirty growth of beard and he looked out of tiny eyes encased in bulging contacts. He was bare to the waist. His white hairless chest drooped and turned in folds at the stomach. Softly, more subtly than the barboy had done, he put his porky stubs of fingers into a suggestive rhythm.

Jesse smiled. "Thanks for the drink," he said. "But I really am expecting someone."

"Oh?" the man said. "Someone—special?"

"Pretty special," Jesse said smoothly, now that the words had become automatic. "He's my fiancée."

"I see." The man frowned momentarily and then brightened. "Well, I thought to myself, I said: E. J., a beauty like that couldn't very well be unattached. But—well, it was certainly worth a try. Sorry."

"Perfectly all right," Jesse said. The predatory little eyes were rolling, the fingers dancing in one last-ditch attempt. "Good evening, Mr. Hobart."

Bluey veins showed under the whiteness of the man's nearly female mammae. Jesse felt slightly amused this

time: it was the other kind, the intent ones, the humorless ones like—like the barboy—that repulsed him, turned him ill, made him want to take a knife and carve unspeakable ugliness into his own smooth ascetic face.

The man turned and waddled away crabwise. The club was becoming more crowded. It was getting later and heads full of liquor shook away the inhibitions of the earlier hours. Jesse tried not to watch, but he had long ago given up trying to rid himself of his fascination. So he watched the men together. The pair over in the corner, pressed close together, dancing with their bodies, never moving their feet, swaying in slow lissome movements to the music, their tongues twisting in the air, jerking, like pink snakes, contracting to points and curling invitingly, barely making touch, then snapping back. The Tongue Dance . . . The couple seated by the bar. One a Beast, the other a Hunter, the Beast old, his cheeks caked hard and cracking with powder and liniments, the perfume rising from his body like steam; the Hunter, young but unhandsome, the fury evident in his eyes, the hurt anger at having to make do with a Beast—from time to time he would look around, wetting his lips in shame. . . . And those two just coming in, dressed in Mother's uniforms, tanned, mustached, proud of their station. . . .

Jesse held the beads apart. *Mina must come soon.* He wanted to run from this place, out into the air, into the darkness and silence.

No. He just wanted Mina. To see her, touch her, listen to the music of her voice. . . .

Two women came in, arm in arm, Beast and Hunter, drunk. They were stopped at the door. Angrily, shrilly, told to leave. The manager swept by Jesse's booth, muttering about them, asking why they should want to come dirtying up The Phallus with their presence when they had their own section, their own clubs—

Jesse pulled his head back inside. He'd gotten used to the light by now, so he closed his eyes against his multiplied image. The disorganized sounds of love got louder, the singsong syrup of voices: deep, throaty, baritone, falsetto. It was crowded now. The Orgies would begin before long and the couples would pair off for the cubicles. He hated the place. But close to Orgy-time you didn't get

noticed here—and where else was there to go? Outside, where every inch of pavement was patrolled electronically, every word of conversation, every movement recorded, catalogued, filed?

Damn Knudson! Damn the little man! Thanks to him, to the Senator, Jesse was now a criminal. Before, it wasn't so bad—not this bad, anyway. You were laughed at and shunned and fired from your job, sometimes kids lobbed stones at you, but at least you weren't hunted. Now—it was a crime. A sickness.

He remembered when Knudson had taken over. It had been one of the little man's first telecasts; in fact, it was the platform that got him the majority vote:

“Vice is on the upswing in our city. In the dark corners of every Unit perversion blossoms like an evil flower. Our children are exposed to its stink, and they wonder—*our children wonder*—why nothing is done to put a halt to this disgrace. We have ignored it long enough! The time has come for *action*, not mere words. The perverts who infest our land must be flushed out, eliminated *completely*, as a threat not only to public morals but to society at large. These sick people must be cured and made normal. The disease that throws men and women together in this dreadful abnormal relationship and leads to acts of retrogression—retrogression that will, unless it is stopped and stopped fast, push us inevitably back to the status of animals—this is to be considered as any other disease. It must be conquered as heart trouble, cancer, polio, schizophrenia, paranoia, all other diseases have been conquered. . . .”

The Women's Senator had taken Knudson's lead and issued a similar pronunciamento and then the bill became a law and the law was carried out.

Jesse sipped at the whiskey, remembering the Hunts. How the frenzied mobs had gone through the city at first, chanting, yelling, bearing placards with slogans: WIPE OUT THE HETEROS! KILL THE QUEERS! MAKE OUR CITY CLEAN

AGAIN! And how they'd lost interest finally after the passion had worn down and the novelty had ended. But they had killed many and they had sent many more to the hospitals. . . .

He remembered the nights of running and hiding, choked dry breath glued to his throat, heart rattling loose. He had been lucky. He didn't look like a hetero. They said you could tell one just by watching him walk—Jesse walked correctly. He fooled them. He was lucky.

And he was a criminal. He, Jesse Four Martin, no different from the rest, tube-born and machine-nursed, raised in the Character Schools like everyone else—was terribly different from the rest.

It had happened—his awful suspicions had crystallized—on his first formal date. The man had been a Rocketeer, the best high quality, even out of the Hunter class. Mother had arranged it carefully. There was the dance. And then the ride in the spacesled. The big man had put an arm about Jesse and—Jesse knew. He knew for certain and it made him very angry and very sad.

He remembered the days that came after the knowledge: bad days, days fallen upon evil, black desires, deep-cored frustrations. He had tried to find a friend at the Crooked Clubs that flourished then, but it was no use. There was a sensationalism, a bravura to these people, that he could not love. The sight of men and women together, too, shocked the parts of him he could not change, and repulsed him. Then the vice squads had come and closed up the clubs and the heteros were forced underground and he never sought them out again or saw them. He was alone.

The beads tinkled.

"Jesse—" He looked up quickly, afraid. It was Mina. She wore a loose man's shirt, an old hat that hid her golden hair: her face was shadowed by the turned-up collar. Through the shirt the rise and fall of her breasts could be faintly detected. She smiled once, nervously.

Jesse looked out the curtain. Without speaking, he put his hands about her soft thin shoulders and held her like this for a long minute.

"Mina—" She looked away. He pulled her chin forward and ran a finger along her lips. Then he pressed her body

to his, tightly, touching her neck, her back, kissing her forehead, her eyes, kissing her mouth. They sat down.

They sought for words. The curtains parted.

"Beer," Jesse said, winking at the barboy, who tried to come closer, to see the one loved by this thin handsome man.

"Yes sir."

The barboy looked at Mina very hard, but she had turned and he could see only the back. Jesse held his breath. The barboy smiled contemptuously then, a smile that said: You're insane—I was hired for my beauty. See my chest, look—a pectoral vision. My arms, strong; my lips—come, were there ever such sensuous ones? And you turn me down for this bag of bones. . . .

Jesse winked again, shrugged suggestively and danced his fingers: *Tomorrow, my friend, I'm stuck tonight. Can't help it. Tomorrow.*

The barboy grinned and left. In a few moments he returned with the beer. "On the house," he said, for Mina's benefit. She turned only when Jesse said, softly:

"It's all right. He's gone now."

Jesse looked at her. Then he reached over and took off the hat. Blond hair rushed out and over the rough shirt.

She grabbed for the hat. "We mustn't," she said. "Please—what if somebody should come in?"

"No one will come in. I told you that."

"But what if? I don't know—I don't like it here. That man at the door—he almost recognized me."

"But he didn't."

"Almost though. And then what?"

"Forget it. Mina, for God's sake. Let's not quarrel."

She calmed. "I'm sorry, Jesse. It's only that—this place makes me feel—"

"—what?"

"Dirty." She said it defiantly.

"You don't really believe that, do you?"

"No. I don't know. I just want to be alone with you."

Jesse took out a cigarette and started to use the lighter. Then he cursed and threw the vulgarly shaped object under the table and crushed the cigarette. "You know that's impossible," he said. The idea of separate Units for homes had disappeared, to be replaced by giant dormito-

ries. There were no more parks, no country lanes. There was no place to hide at all now, thanks to Senator Knudson, to the little bald crest of this new sociological wave. "This is all we have," Jesse said, throwing a sardonic look around the booth, with its carved symbols and framed pictures of entertainment stars—all naked and leering.

They were silent for a time, hands interlocked on the table top. Then the girl began to cry. "I—I can't go on like this," she said.

"I know. It's hard. But what else can we do?" Jesse tried to keep the hopelessness out of his voice.

"Maybe," the girl said, "we ought to go underground with the rest."

"And hide there, like rats?" Jesse said.

"We're hiding here," Mina said, "like rats."

"Besides, Parner is getting ready to crack down. I know, Mina—I work at Centraldome, after all. In a little while there won't be any underground."

"I love you," the girl said, leaning forward, parting her lips for a kiss. "Jesse, I do." She closed her eyes. "Oh, why won't they leave us alone? Why? Just because we're que—"

"Mina! I've told you—don't ever use that word. It isn't true! *We're* not the queers. You've got to believe that. Years ago it was *normal* for men and women to love each other: they married and had children together; that's the way it was. Don't you remember anything of what I've told you?"

The girl sobbed. "Of course I do. I do. But, darling, that was a long time ago."

"Not so long! Where I work—listen to me—they have books. You know, I told you about books? I've read them, Mina. I learned what the words meant from other books. It's only been since the use of artificial insemination—not even five hundred years ago."

"Yes dear," the girl said. "I'm sure, dear."

"Mina, stop that! We are not the unnatural ones, no matter what they say. I don't know exactly how it happened—maybe, maybe as women gradually became equal to men in every way—or maybe solely because of the way we're born—I don't know. But the point is, darling,

the whole world was like us, once. Even now, look at the animals—”

“Jesse! Don’t you dare talk as if we’re like those horrid little dogs and cats and things!”

Jesse sighed. He had tried so often to tell her, show her. But he knew, actually, what she thought. That she felt she was exactly what the authorities told her she was—God, maybe that’s how they all thought, all the Crooked People, all the “unnormal” ones. . . .

The girl’s hands caressed his arms and the touch became suddenly repugnant to him. Unnatural. Terribly unnatural.

Jesse shook his head. Forget it, he thought. Never mind. She’s a woman and you love her and there’s nothing wrong nothing wrong nothing wrong in that . . . or am I the insane person of old days who was insane because he was so sure he wasn’t insane because—

“Disgusting!”

It was the fat little man, the smiling masher, E. J. Two Hobart. But he wasn’t smiling now.

Jesse got up quickly and stepped in front of Mina. “What do you want? I thought I told you—”

The man pulled a metal disk from his trunks. “Vice squad, friend,” he said. “Better sit down.” The disk was pointed at Jesse’s belly.

The man’s arm went out the curtain and two other men came in, holding disks.

“I’ve been watching you quite a while, mister,” the man said. “Quite a while.”

“Look,” Jesse said, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I work at Centraldome and I’m seeing Miss Smith here on some business.”

“We know all about that kind of business,” the man said.

“All right—I’ll tell you the truth. I forced her to come here. I—”

“Mister—didn’t you hear me? I said I’ve been watching you. All evening. Let’s go.”

One man took Mina’s arm, roughly; the other two began to propel Jesse out through the club. Heads turned. Tangled bodies moved embarrassedly.

“It’s all right,” the little fat man said, his white skin glistening with perspiration. “It’s all right, folks. Go on

back to whatever you were doing." He grinned and tightened his grasp on Jesse's arm.

Mina didn't struggle. There was something in her eyes—it took Jesse a long time to recognize it. Then he knew. He knew what she had come to tell him tonight: that even if they hadn't been caught—she would have submitted to the Cure voluntarily. No more worries then, no more guilt. No more meeting at midnight dives, feeling shame, feeling dirt. . . .

Mina didn't meet Jesse's look as they took her out into the street.

"You'll be okay," the fat man was saying. He opened the wagon's doors. "They've got it down pat now—couple days in the ward, one short session with the doctors; take out a few glands, make a few injections, attach a few wires to your head, turn on a machine: presto! You'll be surprised."

The fat officer leaned close. His sausage fingers danced wildly near Jesse's face.

"It'll make a new man of you," he said.

Then they closed the doors and locked them.

Open House

THERE WAS A KNOCK. ONLY ONE, BUT THE GLASS-squared door shook in its poor-fitting jamb and sent sharp sounds trembling throughout the apartment.

Mr. Pierce froze. His head jerked up like the head of a feeding animal suddenly startled; then he recognized the sound and fear began to rearrange him, draining the blood from his head, stoppering his throat, popping his heart up into his craw. He listened and watched his nerves and his courage and his future all eddy away, like rotted lace in a quick wind.

The knock rang again, louder this time.

"Wait!" The word choked loose so softly he could scarcely hear it; it was a prayer. "Wait—just a second. I'll be there in just a second!" Then there was another sound: the tinny clatter of the carving knife that had slipped slowly from his hands and fallen to the pink tile floor.

Mr. Pierce rose and looked at the bathtub. At the water that was not water any longer but, instead, bright red ink, burning red against the glistening white porcelain sides. At the pale things floating in the bright red water, the pale soft things, floating, drifting, turning, like pieces of lamb in a simmering stew.

"Hey, Eddie!" The voice came muffled from behind the knockings. "Anybody home?"

The little man let some air come out of his lungs. He tried to swallow and then started from the bathroom. "Just a minute, will you!" He was almost to the door when he stopped, returned and washed his hands and removed the oilcloth apron that had once been yellow and was now other colors. He dropped the apron to the floor, pulled the shower curtain across the tub—or very nearly across; it had never fit quite snug—inspected himself for stains and went out, closing the door.

Be logical, he told himself. Be calm. And quiet. And

cool. Everything is all right. Nothing has happened. Nothing whatever. Emma is . . . visiting friends. Yes.

He opened the door.

"Wie Geht's!"

Two grinning men of nearly middle years stood at the threshold. Mr. Pierce eyed them, closely.

It was Lew Hoover, in soup-and-fish and a new mustache, and someone else whom Mr. Pierce had never seen before.

"Was ist los mit der gesundheit?"

"My God, Lew!" How long had it been? A year?

"Eddie, you old son-of-a-gun!" Hoover turned to his companion and delivered a sharp elbow. "This is him, pal. Greatest guy there is. Eddie Pierce. God damn. Eddie, want you to meet—man, what's your name?"

"Vernon," the other said. "Vernon F. Fein. I've told you that seventy-three times."

"All right; don't get smart." Hoover leaned forward and whispered hoarsely: "Just met him tonight. At the bar. Square."

Mr. Pierce said nothing. His throat was calcified. He felt a pressure on his hand.

"Didn't get you up or anything, did we?" Hoover asked.

"Oh, no. No. I was just sort of cleaning up a little."

"We come in for a few minutes?"

"Well . . ." Mr. Pierce dropped his eyes. He thought of the times he had prayed to see the face of Lew Hoover, or Len Brooks, or Jimmy Vandergrift, or any of the old gang. How many times. He thought of all the lonely nights alone, with Emma, here . . . "Well, isn't it kind of late, fellows?"

"Shank of the evening! Fein, I want you to look at a guy that didn't used to even know what late was. Three o'clock, four o'clock, five—God, Eddie, remember?"

Mr. Pierce smiled and nodded.

"Then come on—for old time's sake, what do you say? One drink. Then we'll blow. All right?"

"It's awfully late, Lew."

Hoover giggled and belched. His breath smelled strongly of gin. Vernon F. Fein looked pleasantly non-committal.

"Eddie, I promised my pal here, George, that we'd all have one short one together. I promised him. Don't make me out a liar, huh? Or"—Hoover's voice lowered—"would it disturb the little woman?"

"No, as a matter of fact that isn't it at all. Emma's away, visiting. She's not here."

"*Not here!*" Hoover pushed past and weaved across the room to the couch. He made a face and said: "*Was ist los mit der gesundheit?*"

Mr. Pierce fought down the hysteria. He beckoned the stranger in and closed the door. "Well," he said; "just a short one, Lew. Got to rise and shine in the morning."

"That's what I was talking about, one short one, isn't it?"

Mr. Pierce went into the kitchen and quickly made three Scotch-and-waters. When he returned, his visitors were laughing.

"Eddie," Hoover chuckled. "Lordy—I can't believe it's been so long." He stopped chuckling. "Man, what happened?"

"I don't know what you mean, Lew."

"Don't know what I mean! George, what your bloodshots orbs envisage tonight is a miracle in the flesh. You wouldn't believe it, George."

Vernon F. Fein took a large swallow and shifted uncomfortably.

"You see that dried-up mess of bones there?" Hoover renewed his giggling. "That, Fred, was once the sweetest bastard that ever walked on two legs. Fun? Oh my God. Just two years ago. Two stinking years. Every night, a ball. Right, Eddie? Am I right or wrong, every night a ball?"

Mr. Pierce threw down some Scotch.

"No loot in his pocket, all right. No job, all right. You want to get cheered up, who do you see? Eddie Pierce, that's who. Then—whammo!"

"Whammo?" Fein finished his drink and hiccupped.

"It all goes bust. You know what?" Hoover grabbed the beefy man's lapels, roughly. "He wanted to be a writer. Like me: I'm a writer. Movies. Anything wrong with movies?"

"I've always liked Claudette Colbert," Fein said.

"Yeah. Well, Eddie could have had it all. But he was going to write novels. And—you want to know something, stupid? He was good. I'm telling you."

"I wonder," Fein said, dreamily, "what ever happened to Laird Cregar. There was a real actor."

"Shut up, Fred. Are you listening to me or not? Eddie, here, was *good* is what I'm trying to get through that hog's head of yours. He would have made it, too. Right on the damn brink. He—what the living *hell* is this?" Hoover was contorted on the couch. His hand reached up to touch the fringe of a greenly flared lampshade. "Eddie, how come you let her keep such crap in the house?"

"Mr. Pierce," Fein interrupted, cordially. "May I inquire as respects the sort of work you do? I mean your line of business. Do you—"

Hoover howled. "I'll tell you, Jim. He's a goddam butcher. Yah! That's right, all right. His wife's uncle got him a real nice spot in a meat market. Ham hocks and sides of beef—the greatest writer, the sweetest son of a—oh, hell."

Mr. Pierce felt suddenly ill. He could hear the ice cubes rattling in his glass.

"Maybe we ought to leave," Fein said. "Maybe we're keeping people up."

"Then he got married," Hoover went on, his words slurred and indistinct. "A Suth'n belle: very nice, oh my. Course, you can't expect him to spend so much time with the old gang now he's married, right? And, what the hell, you can't expect a wife to get out and work and support her husband while he's slaving over a hot typewriter trying to get ahead, now can you?"

"I understand," Fein said.

"The hell you do, George, the hell you do."

"Lew . . ." Mr. Pierce stepped forward.

"Eddie, listen, remember the party over at Len's where you and me went to sleep in the bathtub? And what's-her-name, Dotty, came in and turned on the water. God damn, we almost drowned!" Hoover chuckled; he was sinking farther down in the couch. "And that trip to Tiajuana—huh? How long were we drunk? Was it really

a week? Hey, and how about the ball we tossed when you sold your first story—”

“I wonder,” Vernon F. Fein said, “if I could please have another drink.”

“Damn right,” Hoover said. He rose and stumbled into the kitchen.

Mr. Pierce sat remembering it all. His wonderful little bachelor apartment and all his things, just so; the parties; and, most important, his friends. Lew and Jimmy and Len and Paul and Ron . . . the best, the loyalest, closest gang of buddies that ever was.

And then, as Lew had said, Emma. Sweet Emma, who'd caught him when the novel wasn't going right and he was feeling low for no reason, low and—at this he smiled—lonely.

What had made him do it, finally? he wondered for perhaps the first time. Exactly how had it happened? he asked himself. . . .

Things had been strange, that's all he'd known right at the moment.

There had been a wind and it blew city-breath into the branches of the outside elms and made them groan like broken flutes; it plucked up tumbleweeds from empty lots and sent them rolling ponderously down the night-darkened streets like fat brown ghosts; it made the windows and screens of every house quiver together with its small fury—

But it wasn't the wind alone that had made things strange.

Work, perhaps? It hadn't been a heavy day, especially. Oh, sure, he'd caught the tip of his finger in the grinder, but that wasn't anything new. He'd cut and sawed and weighed the meat and hated it no more and no less than ever before.

The apartment? That clump of dust beneath the record cabinet and that half-nibbled melting block of chocolate on the couch arm—

No. Not the wind, not the job, not the apartment. Not singly, anyway.

Then what?

Mr. Pierce got up and picked a cigarette from the coffee-table humidor and eased back into the dust-heavy

chair, carefully, uncertainly, as if he half expected someone to strap him in, attach electrodes to his wrists and ankles and throw a switch.

He remembered.

How he had sat just so some hours earlier, and listened to the nasal voice . . .

"Eddie, Sweetheart!"

He had felt his heart come to life, his head begin to throb.

"Eddie, be a lamb and come sit with me."

And he had let the held-in breath rush away, realizing then that the strangeness was not so strange.

"Just a second, honey!" he had called back.

The stubbed-out cigarette uncoiled in the brass ash-tray like a dying animal. Mr. Pierce watched it and yielded, while Hoover talked on and on, to the memories . . .

"Eddieeee, baby!"

"Okay; coming."

He had stood up and listened to the splashing sounds. And then walked quickly across the naked living-room floor, past the spitshine whiteness of ceramic ducks and ceramic geese afloat on the varnished tops of his bookcases; past the tinted Buddha—a gift from Emma's mother—grinning with the ignorance of the ages hidden in that bare white bursting belly, past Emma's gold-framed "Floral Group" and his Matisse "Odalisque," past and through all the freakish unbalance, the mixture of cheap and expensive, her things, and his things, he walked, and into the bathroom.

She was reading.

"Hi."

"Emma, I—"

But—she was reading. How he loved that! No matter what, Donald Duck, Henry Miller, she became hypnotized.

"I hate you," he said.

"Her expression remained serene. She turned a page, smiling.

"I think," he said, "of all the females in the world as a vast regatta—full sails, trim white hulls, sleek, frail, swift. Thousands—millions! And there, in the midst of

them all, you, my darling, my dearest: a great untidy barge, filled with rotting fruit and the ghosts of fled rats, chugging, straining, sinking; a gross smudge on the clear water . . ."

Emma waved one of her hands. "In a minute, dear," she said. "Just a couple more pages."

"Read on, until you putrefy and have to be gotten up with a vacuum cleaner," Mr. Pierce said in a soft, reedy voice.

"I love you," Emma said.

But even "the game" did no good. Mr. Pierce laid his hornrims on the medicine cabinet and hoisted his trousers and rubbed his eyes. The steam floated like layers of mold in the room. He began to perspire. Coldly.

He watched his wife. In the gray water parts of her rose like little pink islands. She studied the pages of her magazine intensely as always, as a rabbit stares in paralyzed fascination at a cobra.

Then, suddenly, without thinking or questioning or wondering, Mr. Pierce snatched the magazine, hurled it across the small room and stood up.

"Why . . . Eddie!"

He then leaned over, took ahold of Emma's legs and pulled hard. Her massive body shot forward in the tub. Mr. Pierce put one foot on her throat and pushed her head beneath the soapy water: she thrashed and squirmed and bubbled, and splashed, but soon it was quiet.

Then Mr. Pierce shook and trembled for almost half an hour. A full hour had passed before he returned from the kitchen with certain utensils—

"I'm going to clear the air now!" Hoover was weaving uncertainly: his face seemed utterly like warm plastic. "Never had the guts to say it all. But I've got a little under my belt now, and I don't care. Get sore! Get tee'd off! Fein—we were all for him when he married this chick. Really. Hell, she had us all snowed. Pretended to be understanding—see, she loved him just the way he was, no changes. *His* friends? *Her* friends. And that's the way it went—for the first two months. Then it starts. And like magic, kid, like *magic*, this sweet-talking chubby li'l gal turns into a goddam—I don't know what. Shrew, fishwife, harridan: you name it. Any of us, the minute

we found out she was what she was, we'd of booted her out on her ear. But that's not Eddie. No-o-o! He wants to do the right thing. So instead, *we* get booted out. And it's all over. His buddies aren't welcome any more. He gives up his ambitions, his friends, and every other goddam thing. Kaput. Schluss."

Listening, Mr. Pierce relived the transformation of his life; all of it, over two years. He relived it in those minutes. How his unconsciously ordered existence had been slowly uprooted and destroyed. How Emma had changed into a new person, one he'd never known. A fat candy-eating movie-magazine-reading dirty-bathrobe-wearing *wife*, with a million nauseating habits. She squeezed his pimples. She made patterns with her feet. She fixed breakfast eggs that glistened with mucus. She threatened to leave—and never did. Refused to, stood adamant. And then, just yesterday, how she had crept up and put her viselike thumbs upon a tender neck-boil and pressed and cooed (her very words!): "Honey, what would you think about having a little stranger in the house?" Oh, how she had murdered him, by inches, centimeters, by days and nights, each time with a new weapon. . . .

Well, it was all right now. He had made it all right. He'd say she ran off with a Turk or an Italian—no one else knew how he had hated her, he'd always been so polite. And if it were done a little at a time, just a little: parts in the freezer, put through the grinder, distributed to a hundred customers over a hundred days . . . who would notice? Who would guess? And without a corpus delicti, or course . . .

Hoover had poured new drinks. He was standing now, weaving like a movie comic. "I'm sorry, Eddie," he said. "Didn't mean to run off at the mouth like that, honest. She'd drive me crazy, personally, but she's your baby. I—well, sorry."

"That's okay, Lew," Mr. Pierce said, graciously.

"Mosey along now. I was a jerk to think we could get it back, I guess."

"No, Lew—" Mr. Pierce hesitated. "It'll come back, some day. You wait and see."

Hoover slapped the face of his companion, who had

fallen asleep. "Come on, Max. Let's us go talk about Claudette Colbert."

Mr. Fein opened his eyes. Hoover picked up his white silk scarf and started for the door. He turned, then, and there was an expression of great sorrow on his face. "And you don't even know what tonight is," he said.

"Who—me?" Fein asked.

"Tell him, Eddie. Or have you forgotten?"

Mr. Pierce shook his head. "I don't think I follow you, Lew."

"Like I told you," Hoover said, to Fein; "he's forgotten. Fred, tonight used to be the biggest in the year for us. All Fools Day. For years. And he didn't even remember. It's why I came by in the first place, and I was waiting, just hoping there that he would—but, Eddie, Eddie! You're dead, kid. Dead." He wheeled, snorted and stopped. "Wait. Got to use the bathroom," he said.

Mr. Pierce pulled himself from his regret and from his memories of the parties they had all thrown on this memorable date so many times in the past. He jumped up. "You can't do that, Lew."

"Huh?"

"It's—broken, Lew. Some trouble with the pipes." Fein had wandered back to the kitchen.

"But," Hoover said, "I've got to."

"It doesn't work. I'm sorry."

Hoover grinned bitterly. "I got people to round up," he muttered. "People that's friends, that remember what the hell tonight is. Time and tide, besides . . ."

"It is out of order," Mr. Pierce said, firmly.

"Okay, then I'll wash my hands. Can I wash my hands?"

"The sink is stopped up."

"Eddie, you're telling me the sink is stopped up?"

"Yes, that's right!" Mr. Pierce almost shouted.

"What are you so jumpy about?"

"I'm not jumpy, Lew: I'm tired. It's all broke, that's all. Can't you understand a simple fact like that?"

Hoover sobered slightly, or seemed to. He looked closely at his friend. "I'm not sure," he said, and pushed forward, stumbling into the bedroom.

"Stop!" Mr. Pierce blenched and threw out his arms.

But the tall man in evening dress had already crossed the room.

"Lew, don't spoil everything! It'll be okay. Just leave, will you!"

Hoover paused at the bathroom door. His hand slipped on the knob, crept back upon it and revolved.

Mr. Pierce spoke in a strong, soft voice now. "Don't go in there." He looked terribly small, terribly frail, terribly helpless.

"When you gotta go," Hoover grinned, "you gotta go. If you don't think so, Eddie, you're all wet. Anyway, I feel a little sick. Sick. Verstay?"

As the tall man turned and started in, Mr. Pierce sighed and followed.

Hoover had a glass partially filled with water when he happened to glance at the curtained tub.

His eyes moved to the slit.

"Holy God! Eddie, what—"

Mr. Pierce's arm traveled in a wide arc. The cleaver, which he had plucked off the medicine shelf, sank deep. He wrenched it loose and swung it another time.

Then he pulled open the shower curtain and lifted the now crumpled figure and tumbled it into the tub and did not look at it.

With a soft rag he wiped his hands, thinking: *Lew!* Thinking: Well, that leaves Jimmy, anyway, and Len and . . . It would still be all right.

Trembling, Mr. Pierce surveyed himself in the mirror and returned to the living room.

Mr. Fein was not asleep any more. He was holding a Miró reproduction upside down and making confused sounds.

"How'd it go?" Fein inquired.

"Well," Mr. Pierce said, "Lew isn't feeling so good. He's decided to stay a while."

"I mean about the toilet."

"It's still broken."

Fein got up, staggered, giggled and quickly regained himself. "Take a look at it," he said.

"No—no need. Thanks anyway. I think it'll probably be all right until tomorrow. I've got a plumber coming—"

"Save your money. That's my business, plumbing. Don't

have a snake here, do you? What'd she do, back up on you?"

"Who?"

"Toilet."

"Oh. Yes: backed up on me."

"Well, we'll take a look-see."

"Ah—have a drink first."

"All righty. Say, tough about Mr. Hoover."

"Too much liquor."

"Uh-huh. It's okay, though: we came in my car."

Mr. Pierce poured two stiff ones and handed a glass to the red-faced man. "You two just met tonight, is that it?" he asked, hopefully.

"'S right. Fine fella, Hoover. Speaks very high of you. Made a bet you'd remember what tonight was. Well, bottoms up! Over the lips and past the gums, look out, stomach, here it comes!"

"Cheers."

"Shame about it, you ask me. No woman is worth losing your friends over, Mr. Fierst."

"I suppose not. Uh—you just decided on the spur of the moment to visit me? I mean, Lew—he didn't happen to mention to anybody else you were coming over here?"

"Didn't exactly know it myself till we were here. Crazy fella, what he told me was we were goin' to see some broads. I mean, you know, girls. Then," Fein giggled, "we turn up here. I think—say, you got a snake? Take a jiffy if you do. See, I'm on vacation now, otherwise I'd have my tools."

"I think perhaps I do."

"Well, let's get at it. Maybe a plunger would do the trick."

"We'll find something for you," Mr. Pierce said, and led the way.

"Must really be nice," Fein said, "to have buddies. Little town where I hail from, not too many friends. That Hoover fella, he told me you got more buddies than anybody he ever knew."

"I had a lot of friends once, yes," Mr. Pierce said. "I will again."

"Sure you will," Fein said.

He had taken no more than two steps inside the bathroom when he gasped, wheeled, gasped again and fell, clawing, to the pink tile floor.

Mr. Pierce steadied himself, removed from Mr. Fein's neck the long thin knife used for trimming fat, and lifted and pulled and strained and at last managed to get the heavy figure into the bathtub.

Water sloshed over the sides, now, but it was not even like red ink any more, but deeper red, and gummy.

Mr. Pierce sighed, permitted one short spasm to shake his body, sighed two more times, and slipped on the oil-cloth apron.

He had it almost tied, when:

There was a knock. Only one, but the glass-squared door shook in its poor-fitting jamb and sent sharp sounds trembling throughout the apartment.

Mr. Pierce froze.

Then there was another sound; a latch opening, a squeak, a voice:

"Happy All Fools Day! Hey—anybody home? Eddie, you old sea-dog, where the devil are you? Hey! It's Len! Just dropped in to say howdy."

"Hi!" Mr. Pierce call out. He removed the apron. "Be with you in a second."

"Jimmy get here yet?"

"No. Not yet."

Mr. Pierce stood erect in the tiny bathroom, looked about, and washed his hands.

Then he walked out with a brand-new sort of smile and a brand-new look in his eyes.

"Good to see you, Len. It's been a long time," he said, wearily.

Last Rites

SOMEWHERE IN THE CHURCH A BABY WAS SHRIEKING. Father Courtney listened to it, and sighed, and made the Sign of the Cross. Another battle, he thought, dismally. Another grand tug of war. And who won this time, Lord? Me? Or that squalling infant, bless its innocence?

"In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen."

He turned and made his way down the pulpit steps, and told himself, Well, you ought to be used to it by now, Heaven knows. After all, you're a priest, not a monologist. What do you care about "audience reaction"? And besides, who ever listens to these sermons of yours, anyway—even under the best of conditions? A few of the ladies of the parish (though you're sure they never hear or understand a word), and, of course, Donovan. But who else?

Screech away, little pink child! Screech until you—no. No, no. Ahhh!

He walked through the sacristy, trying not to think of Donovan, or the big city churches with their fine nurseries, and sound-proof walls, and amplifiers that amplified . . .

One had what one had: It was God's will.

And were things really so bad? Here there was the smell of forests, wasn't there? And in what city parish could you see wild flowers growing on the hills like bright lava? Or feel the earth breathing?

He opened the door and stepped outside.

The fields were dark-silver and silent. Far above the fields, up near the clouds, a rocket launch moved swiftly, dragging its slow thunder behind it.

Father Courtney blinked.

Of course things were not so bad. Things would be just fine, he thought, and I would not be nervous and annoyed at little children, if only—

Abruptly he put his hands together. "Father," he whispered, "let him be well. Let that be Your will!"

Then, deciding not to wait to greet the people, he wiped his palms with a handkerchief and started for the rectory.

The morning was very cold. A thin film of dew coated each pebble along the path, and made them all glisten like drops of mercury. Father Courtney looked at the pebbles and thought of other walks down this path, which led through a wood to Hidden River, and of himself laughing; of excellent wine and soft cushions and himself arguing, arguing; of a thousand sweet hours in the past.

He walked and thought these things and did not hear the telephone until he had reached the rectory stairs.

A chill passed over him, unaccountably.

He went inside and pressed a yellow switch. The screen blurred, came into focus. The face of an old man appeared, filling the screen.

"Hello, Father."

"George!" the priest smiled and waved his fist, menacingly. "George, why haven't you contacted me?" He sputtered. "Aren't you out of that bed yet?"

"Not yet, Father."

"Well, I expected it, I knew it. *Now* will you let me call a doctor?"

"No—" The old man in the screen shook his head. He was thin and pale. His hair was profuse, but very white, and there was something in his eyes. "I think I'd like you to come over, if you could."

"I shouldn't," the priest said, "after the way you've been treating all of us. But, if there's still some of that Chianti left . . ."

George Donovan nodded. "Could you come right away?"

"Father Yoshida won't be happy about it."

"Please. Right away."

Father Courtney felt his fingers draw into fists. "Why?" he asked, holding onto the conversational tone. "Is anything the matter?"

"Not really," Donovan said. His smile was brief. "It's just that I'm dying."

"And I'm going to call Doctor Ferguson. Don't give me any argument, either. This nonsense has gone far—"

The old man's face knotted. "No," he said, loudly. "I forbid you to do that."

"But you're ill, man. For all we know, you're *seriously* ill. And if you think I'm going to stand around and watch you work yourself into the hospital just because you happen to dislike doctors, you're crazy."

"Father, listen—*please*. I have my reasons. You don't understand them, and I don't blame you. But you've got to trust me. I'll explain everything, if you'll promise me you won't call *anyone*."

Father Courtney breathed unsteadily; he studied his friend's face. Then he said, "I'll promise this much. I won't contact a doctor until I've seen you."

"Good." The old man seemed to relax.

"I'll be there in fifteen minutes."

"With your Little Black Bag?"

"Certainly not. You're going to be all right."

"Bring it, Father. Please. Just in case."

The screen blurred and danced and went white.

Father Courtney hesitated at the blank telephone.

Then he walked to a table and raised his fists and brought them down hard, once.

You're going to get well, he thought. It isn't going to be too late.

Because if you are dying, if you really are, and I could have prevented it . . .

He went to the closet and drew on his overcoat.

It was thick and heavy, but it did not warm him. As he returned to the sacristy he shivered and thought that he had never been so cold before in all his life.

The Helicar whirled and dropped quickly to the ground. Father Courtney removed the ignition key, pocketed it, and thrust his bulk out the narrow door, wheezing.

A dull rumbling sifted down from the sky. The wake of fleets a mile away, ten miles, a hundred.

It's raining whales in our backyard, the priest thought, remembering how Donovan had described the sound once to a little girl.

A freshet of autumn leaves burst against his leg, softly,

and for a while he stood listening to the rockets' dying rumble, watching the shapes of gold and red that scattered in the wind, like fire.

Then he whispered, "Let it be Your will," and pushed the picket gate.

The front door of the house was open.

He walked in, through the living-room, to the study.

"George."

"In here," a voice answered.

He moved to the bedroom, and twisted the knob.

George Donovan lay propped on a cloudbank of pillows, his thin face white as the linen. He was smiling.

"I'm glad to see you, Father," he said, quietly.

The priest's heart expanded and shrank and began to thump in his chest.

"The Chianti's down here in the night-table," Donovan gestured. "Pour some: morning's a good enough time for a dinner wine."

"Not now, George."

"Please. It will help."

Father Courtney pulled out the drawer and removed the half-empty bottle. He got a glass from the bookshelf, filled it. Dutifully, according to ritual, he asked, "For you?"

"No," Donovan said. "Thank you all the same." He turned his head. "Sit over there, Father, where I can see you."

The priest frowned. He noticed that Donovan's arms were perfectly flat against the blanket, that his body was rigid, outlined beneath the covering. No part of the old man moved except the head, and that slowly, unnaturally.

"That's better. But take off your coat—it's terribly hot in here. You'll catch pneumonia."

The room was full of cold winds from the open shutters.

Father Courtney removed his coat.

"You've been worried, haven't you?" Donovan asked.

The priest nodded. He tried to sense what was wrong, to smell the disease, if there was a disease, if there was anything.

"I'm sorry about that." The old man seemed to sigh. His eyes were misted, webbed with distance, lightly. "But

I wanted to be alone. Sometimes you have to be alone, to think, to get things straight. Isn't that true?"

"Sometimes, I suppose, but—"

"No. I know what you're going to say, the questions you want to ask. But there's not enough time . . ."

Father Courtney arose from the chair, and walked quickly to the telephone extension. He jabbed a button. "I'm sorry, George," he said, "but you're going to have a doctor."

The screen did not flicker.

He pressed the button again, firmly.

"Sit down," the tired voice whispered. "It doesn't work. I pulled the wires ten minutes ago."

"Then I'll fly over to Milburn—"

"If you do, I'll be dead when you get back. Believe that: I know what I'm talking about."

The priest clenched and unclenched his stubby fingers, and sat down in the chair again.

Donovan chuckled. "Drink up," he said. "We can't have good wine going to waste, can we?"

The priest put the glass to his lips. He tried to think clearly. If he rushed out to Milburn and got Doctor Ferguson, perhaps there'd be a chance. Or—He took a deep swallow.

No. That wouldn't do. It might take hours.

Donovan was talking now; the words lost—a hum of locusts in the room, a far-off murmuring; then, like a radio turned up: "Father, how long have we been friends, you and I?"

"Why . . . twenty years," the priest answered. "Or more."

"Would you say you know me very well by now?"

"I believe so."

"Then tell me first, right now, would you say that I've been a good man?"

Father Courtney smiled. "There've been worse," he said and thought of what this man had accomplished in Mount Vernon, quietly, in his own quiet way, over the years. The building of a decent school for the children—Donovan had shamed the people into it. The new hospital—Donovan's doing, his patient campaigning. Enter-

tainment halls for the young; a city fund for the poor; better teachers, better doctors—all, all because of the old man with the soft voice, George Donovan.

"Do you mean it?"

"Don't be foolish. And don't be treacly, either. Of course I mean it."

In the room, now, a strange odor fumed up, suddenly.

The old man said, "I'm glad." Still he did not move.

"But, I'm sorry I asked. It was unfair."

"I don't have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

"Neither do I, Father, completely. I thought I did, once, but I was wrong."

The priest slapped his knees, angrily. "Why won't you let me get a doctor? We'll have plenty of time to talk afterwards."

Donovan's eyes narrowed, and curved into what resembled a smile. "You're my doctor," he said. "The only one who can help me now."

"In what way?"

"By making a decision." The voice was reedy: it seemed to waver and change pitch.

"What sort of a decision?"

Donovan's head jerked up. He closed his eyes and remained this way for a full minute, while the acrid smell bellied and grew stronger and whorled about the room in invisible currents.

"'. . . the gentleman lay graveward with his furies . . .'
Do you remember that, Father?"

"Yes," the priest said. "Thomas, isn't it?"

"Thomas, He's been here with me, you know, really; and I've been asking him things. On the theory that poets aren't entirely human. But he just grins. 'You're dying of strangers,' he says; and grins. Bless him." The old man lowered his head. "He disappointed me."

Father Courtney reached for a cigarette, crumpled the empty pack, laced and unlaced his fingers. He waited, remembering the times he had come to this house, all the fine evenings. Ending now?

Yes, Whatever else he would learn, he knew that, suddenly: they were ending.

"What sort of a decision, George?"

"A theological sort."

Father Courtney snorted and walked to a window. Outside, the sun was hidden behind a curtain of gray. Birds sat black and still on the telephone lines, like notes of music; and there was rain.

"Is there something you think you haven't told me?" he asked.

"Yes."

"About yourself?"

"Yes."

"I don't think so, George." Father Courtney turned. "I've known about it for a long time."

The old man tried to speak.

"I've known very well. And now I think I understand why you've refused to see anyone."

"No," Donovan said. "You don't. Father, listen to me: it isn't what you think."

"Nonsense." The priest reverted to his usual gruffness. "We've been friends for too many years for this kind of thing. It's *exactly* what I think. You're an intelligent, well-read, mule-stubborn old man who's worried he won't get to Heaven because sometimes he has doubts."

"That isn't—"

"Well, rubbish! Do you think I don't ask questions, myself, once in a while? Just because I'm a priest, do you think I go blindly on, never wondering, not even for a minute?"

The old man's eyes moved swiftly, up and down.

"Every intelligent person doubts, George, once in a while. And we all feel terrible about it, and we're terribly sorry. But I assure you, if this were enough to damn us, Heaven would be a wilderness." Father Courtney reached again for a cigarette. "So you've shut yourself up like a hermit and worried and stewed and endangered your life, and all for nothing." He coughed. "Well, that's it, isn't it?"

"I wish it were," Donovan said, sadly. His eyes kept dancing. There was a long pause; then he said, "Let me pose you a theoretical problem, Father. Something I've been thinking about lately."

Father Courtney recalled the sentence, and how many

times it had begun the evenings of talk—wonderful talk! These evenings, he realized, were part of his life now. An important part. For there was no one else, no one of Donovan's intelligence, with whom you could argue any subject under the sun—from Frescobaldi to baseball, from Colonization on Mars to the early French symbolists, to agrarian reforms, to wines, to theology . . .

The old man shifted in the bed. As he did, the acrid odor diminished and swelled and pulsed. "You once told me," he said, "that you read imaginative fiction, didn't you?"

"I suppose so."

"And that there were certain concepts you could swallow—such as parallel worlds, mutated humans, and the like—, but that other concepts you couldn't swallow at all. Artificial life, I believe you mentioned, and time travel, and a few others."

The priest nodded.

"Well, let's take one of these themes for our problem. Will you do that? Let's take the first idea."

"All right. Then the doctor."

"We have this man, Father," Donovan said, gazing at the ceiling. "He looks perfectly ordinary, you see, and it would occur to no one to doubt this; but he is not ordinary. Strictly speaking, he isn't even a man. For, though he lives, he isn't alive. You follow? He is a thing of wires and coils and magic, a creation of other men. He is a machine . . ."

"George!" The priest shook his head. "We've gone through this before: it's foolish to waste time. I came here to help you, not to engage in a discussion of science fiction themes!"

"But that's how you *can* help me," Donovan said.

"Very well," the priest sighed. "But you know my views on this. Even if there were a logical purpose to which such a creature might be put—and I can't think of any—I still say they will never create a machine that is capable of abstract thought. Human intelligence is a spiritual thing—and spiritual things can't be duplicated by men."

"You really believe that?"

"Of course I do. Extrapolation of known scientific

advances is perfectly all right; but this is something else entirely."

"Is it?" the old man said. "What about Pasteur's discovery? Or the X-Ray? Did Roentgen correlate a lot of embryonic data, Father, or did he come upon something brand new? What do you think even the scientists themselves would have said to the idea of a machine that would see through human tissue? They would have said, It's fantastic. And it was, too, and is. Nevertheless, it exists."

"It's not the same thing."

"No . . . I suppose that's true. However, I'm not trying to convince you of my thesis. I ask merely that you accept it for the sake of the problem. Will you?"

"Go ahead, George."

"We have this man, then. He's artificial, but he's perfect: great pains have been taken to see to this. Perfect, no detail spared, however small. He looks human, and he acts human, and for all the world knows, he is human. In fact, sometimes even he, our man, gets confused. When he feels a pain in his heart, for instance, it's difficult for him to remember that he has no heart. When he sleeps and awakes refreshed, he must remind himself that this is all controlled by an automatic switch somewhere inside his brain, and that he doesn't *actually* feel refreshed. He must think, I'm not real, I'm not real, I'm not real!

"But this becomes impossible, after a while. Because he doesn't believe it. He begins to ask, Why? *Why* am I not real? Where is the difference, when you come right down to it? Humans eat and sleep—as I do. They talk—as I do. They move and work and laugh—as I do. What they think, I think, and what they feel, I feel. Don't I?

"He wonders, this mechanical man does, Father, what would happen if all the people on earth were suddenly to discover they were mechanical also. Would they feel any the less human? Is it likely that they would rush off to woo typewriters and adding machines? Or would they think perhaps, of revising their definition of the word, 'Life'?

"Well, our man thinks about it, and thinks about it, but he never reaches a conclusion. He doesn't believe he's

nothing more than an advanced calculator, but he doesn't really believe he's human, either: not completely.

"All he knows is that the smell of wet grass is a fine smell to him, and that the sound of the wind blowing through trees is very sad and very beautiful, and that he loves the whole earth with an impossible passion . . ."

Father Courtney shifted uncomfortably in his chair. If only the telephone worked, he thought. Or if he could be sure it was safe to leave.

". . . other men made the creature, as I've said; but many more like him were made. However, of them all, let's say only he was successful."

"Why?" the priest asked, irritably. "Why would this be done in the first place?"

Donovan smiled. "Why did we send the first ship to the moon? Or bother to split the atom? For no very good reason, Father. Except the reason behind all of science: Curiosity. My theoretical scientists were curious to see if it could be accomplished, that's all."

The priest shrugged.

"But perhaps I'd better give our man a history. That would make it a bit more logical. All right, he was born a hundred years ago, roughly. A privately owned industrial monopoly was his mother, and a dozen or so assorted technicians his father. He sprang from his electronic womb fully formed. But, as the result of an accident—lack of knowledge, what have you—he came out rather different from his unsuccessful brothers. A mutant! A mutated robot, Father—now there's an idea that ought to appeal to you! Anyway, *he* knew who, or what, he was. He remembered. And so—to make it brief—when the war interrupted the experiment and threw things into a general uproar, our man decided to escape. He wanted his individuality. He wanted to get out of the zoo.

"It wasn't particularly easy, but he did this. Once free, of course, it was impossible to find him. For one thing, he had been constructed along almost painfully ordinary lines. And for another, they couldn't very well release the information that a mechanical man built by their laboratories was wandering the streets. It would cause a panic. And there was enough panic, what with the nerve gas and the bombs."

"So they never found him, I gather."

"No," Donovan said, wistfully. "They never found him. And they kept their secret well: it died when they died."

"And what happened to the creature?"

"Very little, to tell the truth. They'd given him a decent intelligence, you see—far more decent, and complex, than they knew—so he didn't have much trouble finding small jobs. A rather old-looking man, fairly strong—he made out. Needless to say, he couldn't stay in the same town for more than twenty years or so, because of his inability to age, but this was all right. Everyone makes friends and loses them. He got used to it."

Father Courtney sat very still now. The birds had flown away from the telephone lines, and were at the window, beating their wings, and crying harshly.

"But all this time, he's been thinking, Father. Thinking and reading. He makes quite a study of philosophy, and for a time he favors a somewhat peculiar combination of Russell and Schopenhauer—unbitter bitterness, you might say. Then this phase passes, and he begins to search through the vast theological and metaphysical literature. For what? He isn't sure. However, he is sure of one thing, now: He *is*, indubitably, human. Without breath, without heart, without blood or bone, artificially created, he thinks this and believes it, with a fair amount of firmness, too. Isn't that remarkable!"

"It is indeed," the priest said, his throat oddly tight and dry. "Go on."

"Well," Donovan chuckled, "I've caught your interest, have I? All right, then. Let us imagine that one hundred years have passed. The creature has been able to make minor repairs on himself, but—at last—he is dying. Like an ancient motor, he's gone on running year after year, until he's all paste and hairpins, and now, like the motor, he's falling apart. And nothing and no one can save him."

The acrid aroma burned and fumed.

"Here's the real paradox, though. Our man has become religious. Father! He doesn't have a living cell within him, yet he's concerned about his soul!"

Donovan's eyes quieted, as the rest of him did. "The problem," he said, "is this: Having lived creditably for

over a century as a member of the human species, can this creature of ours hope for Heaven? Or will he 'die' and become only a heap of metal cogs?"

Father Courtney leapt from the chair, and moved to the bed. "George, in Heaven's name, let me call Doctor Ferguson!"

"Answer the question first. Or haven't you decided?"

"There's nothing to decide," the priest said, with impatience. "It's a preposterous idea. No machine can have a soul."

Donovan made the sighing sound, through closed lips. He said, "You don't think it's conceivable, then, that God could have made an exception here?"

"What do you mean?"

"That He could have taken pity on this theoretical man of ours, and breathed a soul into him after all? Is that so impossible?"

Father Courtney shrugged. "It's a poor word, impossible," he said. "But it's a poor problem, too. Why not ask me whether pigs ought to be allowed to fly?"

"Then you admit it's conceivable?"

"I admit nothing of the kind. It simply isn't the sort of question any man can answer."

"Not even a priest?"

"Especially not a priest. You know as much about Catholicism as I do, George; you ought to know how absurd the proposition is."

"Yes," Donovan said. His eyes were closed.

Father Courtney remembered the time they had argued furiously on what would happen if you went back in time and killed your own grandfather. This was like that argument. Exactly like it—exactly. It was no stranger than a dozen other discussions (What if Mozart had been a writer instead of a composer? If a person died and remained dead for an hour and were then revived, would he be haunted by his own ghost?) Plus, perhaps, the fact that Donovan might be in a fever. Perhaps and might and why do I sit here while his life may be draining away . . .

The old man made a sharp noise. "But you can tell me this much," he said. "If our theoretical man were

dying, and you knew that he was dying, would you give him Extreme Unction?"

"George, you're delirious."

"No, I'm not: please, Father! Would you give this creature the Last Rites? If, say, you knew him? If you'd known him for years, as a friend, as a member of the parish?"

The priest shook his head. "It would be sacrilegious."

"But why? You said yourself that he might have a soul, that God might have granted him this. Didn't you say that?"

"I—"

"Father, remember, he's a friend of yours. You know him *well*. You and he, this creature, have worked together, side by side, for years. You've taken a thousand walks together, shared the same interests, the same love of art and knowledge. For the sake of the thesis, Father. Do you understand?"

"No," the priest said, feeling a chill freeze into him. "No, I don't."

"Just answer this, then. If your friend were suddenly to reveal himself to you as a machine, and he was dying, and wanted very much to go to Heaven—what would you do?"

The priest picked up the wine glass and emptied it. He noticed that his hand was trembling. "Why—" he began, and stopped, and looked at the silent old man in the bed, studying the face, searching for madness, for death.

"*What would you do?*"

An unsummoned image flashed through his mind. Donovan, kneeling at the altar for Communion, Sunday after Sunday; Donovan, with his mouth firmly shut, while the others' yawned; Donovan, waiting to the last moment, then snatching the Host, quickly, dartingly, like a lizard gobbling a fly.

Had he ever seen Donovan eat?

Had he seen him take even one glass of wine, ever?

Father Courtney shuddered slightly, brushing away the images. He felt unwell. He wished the birds would go elsewhere.

Well, answer him, he thought. *Give him an answer.*

Then get in the helicar and fly to Milburn and pray it's not too late . . .

"I think," the priest said, "that in such a case, I would administer Extreme Unction."

"Just as a precautionary measure?"

"It's all very ridiculous, but—I think that's what I'd do. Does that answer the question?"

"It does, Father. It does." Donovan's voice came from nowhere. "There is one last point, then I'm finished with my little thesis."

"Yes?"

"Let us say the man dies and you give him Extreme Unction; he does or does not go to Heaven, provided there is a Heaven. What happens to the body? Do you tell the townspeople they have been living with a mechanical monster all these years?"

"What do you think, George?"

"I think it would be unwise. They remember our theoretical man as a friend, you see. The shock would be terrible. Also, they would never believe he was the only one of his kind: they'd begin to suspect their neighbors of having clockwork interiors. And some of them might be tempted to investigate and see for sure. And, too, the news would be bound to spread, all over the world. I think it would be a bad thing to let anyone know, Father."

"How would I be able to suppress it?" the priest heard himself ask, seriously.

"By conducting a private autopsy, so to speak. Then, afterwards, you could take the parts to a junkyard and scatter them."

Donovan's voice dropped to a whisper. Again the locust hum.

". . . and if our monster had left a note to the effect that he had moved to some unspecified place, you . . ."

The acrid smell billowed, all at once, like a steam, a hiss of blinding vapor.

"George."

Donovan lay unstirring on the cloud of linen, his face composed, expressionless.

"George!"

The priest reached his hand under the blanket and touched the heart-area of Donovan's chest. He tried to pull the eyelids up: they would not move.

He blinked away the burning wetness. "Forgive me!" he said, and paused and took from his pocket a small white jar and a white stole.

He spoke softly, under his breath, in Latin. While he spoke, he touched the old man's feet and head with glistening fingertips.

Then, when many minutes had passed, he raised his head.

Rain sounded in the room, and swift winds, and far-off rockets.

Father Courtney grasped the edge of the blanket.

He made the Sign of the Cross, breathed, and pulled downward, slowly.

After a long while he opened his eyes.

The Murderers

THE PALE YOUNG MAN IN THE BRIGHT RED VEST LEANED back, sucked reflectively at a Russian candy pellet—the kind with real Jamaican rum inside—and said, yawning: “Let’s kill somebody tonight.”

“Herbie, *please!*” the other man said. He re-adjusted his fingers on the strings of the large guitar and plucked out a few loose chords.

*“Come listen, all you boys ’n girls,” he sang,
“I’se jest from Tuckyhoe;
I’m gwine’a sing a little song:
My name’s Jim Crow.
Weel about ’n turn about and do jes’ so,
Ebry time I weel about I jump Jim Crow.
Ohhh, arter I been—”*

“Stop!” Herbert Foss put his hands to his ears. “You depress me. Besides, you’re off key—utterly, hopelessly.”

“Liar!” Ronald Raphael flung the guitar clear across the room. “I despise you,” he said. “You know that, of course?”

“Of course.”

They sat quietly for a while. That is, Herbert did; his younger friend lay belly-down on the rug, outstretched legs encased in chartreuse slacks, quite still but for the slow motion of his several toes, which waggled in their straw-thonged sandals like small snakes.

The room had grown dark. A little moonlight sifted through the dense foliage of the outside garden and through the heavy leaded French window, making shadows where the African masks and imitation shrunken heads hung on the walls. From the bathroom a fresco of a naked green woman without a face glowed; otherwise, the room was dark.

Herbert got up from his chair and walked over to one of the many bookcases. Upon a copy of *Les Fleurs du Mal* was a clay-colored skull, and upon the skull was a candle. Herbert lit the candle. It flickered.

"Why not?" he said.

"Why not what?"

"Murder somebody."

Ronald gathered himself into a squatting position. "Anyone particular you have in mind?"

"Don't be foolish. No—I've given the matter some thought and it's really quite priceless. Though I ought to warn you: it involves courage."

"How extremely *roman policier*. But, Herbie, are you serious?"

"Deadly. You're for it?"

"Sounds all right. When?"

Herbert walked to the center of the big high-ceilinged room and blew at a mobile. "Tonight," he said, lowering his voice. "I mean, after all. I mean, damn it, why not?"

Ronald picked at the tendriled frieze which protruded from his carelessly buttoned shirt, and smiled inscrutably. He went to the phonograph and put on some minor Bartók; then he turned, a remarkably thin figure in the moonlight window, and whipped off his heavy black horn-rimmed spectacles.

"Go on," he said.

Herbert had been tamping down the tobacco in a long, hand-carved pipe. "Well, the way I see it, we've got to be methodical," he said. "Too many crimes are done clumsily, without discretion, without grace and forethought, you know? In the case of the *crime passionel*, it's always a simple matter for the police; with a planned murder, the criminal gets panicky at the last minute and ruins everything. A poor lot, Ronnie: their motives are so base, so unbearably bourgeois. Don't you agree?"

"One hundred per cent."

"Well then, don't you see, we fall into neither category. We aren't going to commit a *crime passionel*, and as for the plan—why, we don't even know the identity of our victim yet!"

Ronald clapped his hands together once, rushed into the

kitchen and returned bearing a bottle and two long-stemmed glasses.

"A toast!" he said, delightedly. "A toast, to our nameless friend, wherever he may be."

They drank in solemn silence, concluding by flinging their glasses against the fireplace.

Herbert's close-cropped blond hair was haloed in the guttering candlelight. "How invigorating!" he exclaimed. "It's the first time in three months that I haven't been bored. Not since that Javanese girl—what *was* her name? I've forgotten. It's unimportant: she bored me, anyway. But this—"

Ronald fairly shook with excitement. "I must give you credit. It *has* all been so infernally dull—dull, *dull*."

The candle sputtered out in a soft wind from the open window.

"Then," Herbert said, "you'll go through with it?"

"I simply can't wait, old man."

"Tonight?"

"Immediately!"

"All right. I've mapped out a little schedule, a working plan. Please listen carefully."

Herbert leaned close to his friend's ear and began to whisper, in soft, conspiratorial tones . . .

"Bughouse Square" was not thickly populated, for the hour was late. There were no speakers, no huddled groups. Only the old men and women who sit on the hard benches. A young girl glued to the side of a sailor swung her hips against his as they meandered across the lawn; a woman in many shredded silk dresses, many scarves and handkerchiefs, hobbled haltingly, moving her lips; a lithe Negro man pranced by the rim of a stone fountain. There were no others and the night was empty of human sounds, except for the traffic far away and the city's distant hum.

Ronald shifted uncomfortably. "Don't you think," he said, grinding out another cigarette, "that we should go somewhere? Like home, maybe? Damn it, I'm freezing to death—we've been here for two hours, for Chrissake." His chartreuse slacks had been replaced by faded levis; he had on a cheap windbreaker and his face was dirty.

Herbert had on a peajacket and looked more disrepu-

table: his hair was blackened with shoe polish and he wasn't wearing his glasses. "Whine, whine, whine," he said. "After all this trouble, you want to give up?"

"But we've been here *two hours*, I'm telling you. What's wrong with killing one of these guys?"

"Not so loud! They offend me, that's what's wrong with it. Besides, they look like they belong here; they'd be missed. We want someone completely anonymous—a nobody, a nothing, without friends or relatives. That was the plan."

Ronald sighed loudly. "All right. But it *is* getting late."

"Be *still*. Go, if you choose; leave me, leave and live your coward's life. Or, staying, shut up."

"There is no call for getting rude."

They sat and watched the Bughouse Square people break up slowly, only the bench sitters remaining, the old people.

"Very well," Herbert said, finally, "perhaps tonight is unlucky for us. I'll give it another ten minutes."

Ten minutes passed and the night grew colder and later and the two youths fidgeted.

Then they got up. And they were clear past the stone fountain before they saw the figure moving toward them.

"*Shhh. Wait!*" said Herbert.

The figure drew closer. It was a man: an old man, but not old like the bench sitters: his eyes were alive, and his beard was the color of Georgia mud. He was smoking the butt of a peeling cigar whose tip glowed red against his wrinkled leather skin. And his clothes were rags.

Herbert looked around quickly and saw that they were alone.

"Good evening, sir," he said softly, and the old man glanced up.

"Evening, boys."

"Late, isn't it?"

"Reckon so," the old man said, scratching his nose. "Late for some, early for others, hey?"

"Ha ha," Herbert said. "That's very good."

The old man cocked his head to one side and studied the two young men with casual intensity. "Say," he said, "you boys wouldn't happen to have the price of a flop on you, now would you?"

Herbert looked astonished. "Why, surely you don't mean that you haven't a place to sleep tonight!"

"Ain't tromping the sidewalks for my health, young fella. Tell you what—for two bits I could get me a fine old place."

"But, don't you have friends?" Ronald said.

"No," the old man said. "Them as I had is all under the ground. They found *them* a place to sleep, anyways."

Herbert took the old man's arm. "This is terrible! What a comment upon our society!"

"Since you're placing blame, laddie buck, place her on a blondined woman long gone . . ."

"A relative?" Ronald said quickly.

"No, no. My wife. Or pretty nearly, leastwise. See, I was a traveling salesman, supporting my dear mother at the time, when—but that there is a long old story. Now about that two bits—"

Herbert and Ronald exchanged short but highly meaningful looks.

"See here," Herbert said, "we don't have any money with us right now, but if you'd care to share our quarters for the evening, we'd be only too happy to oblige. Permit me to introduce us, Mr.—"

They had begun walking automatically in the general direction of the car, headed for the darkest, emptiest streets.

"Fogarty," the old man said, "James Oliver Fogarty." He said it with a certain wonderment, as if surprised to recall it so exactly.

Herbert said, "I am Artur Schopenhauer. And this is my good friend, Fred Nietzsche."

"Proud to know you, boys."

They passed many dark stores, many dirty gray brick apartments and hotels of clapboard and they didn't encounter a soul.

"We wouldn't be able to sleep, thinking of you wandering the cold night, Mr. Fogarty. I can only regret that we can't accommodate *all* the lonely, the sad of heart, the homeless of the world," Herbert said, digging Ronald in the ribs.

"Now there is a Christian thought," the old man said, "if I ever heard one: a fine Christian thought. Say, you

wouldn't by chance have a bite to eat at your place?"

"Oh yes," Ronald said. "We'll fix you up just fine. Wait and see!"

They walked to the blackest section of the blackness, and when they caught sight of the car—a long, low, foreign make—Ronald halted and said: "Would you excuse us, Mr. Fogarty? I'd like to have a word with my friend."

The old man looked slightly bewildered. "Sure thing," he said.

"I just happened to think," Ronald whispered, having stepped into an odorous doorway, "what if someone sees him in the car?"

Herbert rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "You think we should do it now," he said, "right here and now, is that what you mean?"

"Well, no, not exactly."

They thought a moment. "We'll put the top up," Herbert said, brightening. "And place him between us. And I'll go through side streets. All right?"

"Well . . ."

"Come now; have you ever seen such a fatted calf? Sans friends, sans relatives—*exactly* what we wanted!"

The old man smiled at them from the corner.

Herbert smiled back. "We'll take him to the place, give him a few drinks, and then . . ."

"By the way, who's going to do it?"

"Does it matter?"

They walked back to the corner and helped the ragged old man into the automobile; fastened the top securely, looked around, roared away.

"Hey now, this is sure a funny place," the old man said, as they propelled him up the curving stone ramp. It was a small walkway, bounded on either side by tropical growths, spiny fronds and thick leaves with tips as sharp as needles.

"You like it?" Herbert said. "It used to belong to a religious sect—now defunct—and this was known as the 'death walk.' People brought their lately departed relatives to be resuscitated."

"You don't mean to tell me!"

"It suits our modest wants."

A curve in the ramp brought them to a large oak door topped by an octagonal window of glass stained with curious symbols: from this promontory, the city's tiny lights could be clearly seen. They continued down the hall past the door, past several smaller doors, to one no different from the rest except that it was painted bright red.

"Home," Ronald said.

"By golly!" the old man said, and they went in.

Suffused light softened the rather startling effect of the gold walls and black ceiling; however, the fish-net drapes, colored orange, stood out in bold relief. The old man studied the room, or seemed to: his eyes darted from point to point, subtly.

"What will it be, sir," Ronald said, taking the double coat and hat, "Martini? Manhattan? Scotch-on-the-rocks?"

"Welsir, boys, those all sound mighty appetizing—but, now, if you have a sandwich or something—"

"Of course." Herbert motioned to Ronald and they went into the kitchen.

"Did you see anybody?" Herbert whispered.

"No."

"What about when I parked the car—anybody, in the windows or anything?"

"No. We weren't seen. I was watching."

"Doesn't it excite you! There's something so terribly *existential* in committing the perfect crime. Here—you fix the sandwiches, I'll see to it he has enough to drink."

The old man was sitting in the chair quite still, his hands folded across his stomach. He smelt somewhat rancid.

"Thank you, laddie." He took the drink and downed it at a single gulp. "Ahhh!"

"Another? Help yourself."

"Thank you, laddie!"

Ronald came out with the tray, and set it on the purple ottoman before the old man. "This ought to make you feel better, Mr. Fogarty," he said.

As the old man began to eat, Herbert said: "We've a bit of straightening up to do in the kitchen, so if you'll excuse us?" and they went back into the kitchen and closed the door.

"First, another toast!" Ronald said. A bottle was taken from the cupboard. "To James Oliver Fogarty: R.I.P!"

Herbert smiled, and they chug-a-lugged the gin.

"By the bye, old man," Ronald said, grimacing, "you haven't yet told me how we're going to do it."

Looking somewhat blank, Herbert sat on the drain-board and replaced his glasses. "Well," he said, "let's give it some thought. It's actually an embarrassment of riches, you know. We *could* shoot him, I suppose."

"Oh *no*, Herbie—*everybody* shoots *everybody* these days. Also, it would make too much noise. I mean, you know Mrs. Fitzsimmons."

"You're right. Dear Mrs. Fitzsimmons. But *dear* Mrs. Fitzsimmons! Well . . . what about poison? Silent, fast, effective, its praises sung in lyric and in epic. . . . I rather fancy poison. Do we have any in the apartment?"

"I don't think so. Unless you refer to that wine you bought yesterday."

"At a time like this, levity seems grotesquely out of place, Ronnie. Do control yourself and not be such an ass."

"Sorry."

"Now let's see. Odd I didn't work this part of it out . . . I know! It's too perfect!" Herbert pulled open a drawer and withdrew a large butcher knife spotted with cake frosting.

Ronald shuddered slightly.

"Well?"

"It's all right, I guess. But—"

"But? *But?*"

"I'm just thinking of all that blood. It's supposed to be hard to clean up, and the police find things in it."

Herbert made a face and put down the knife. He poured two more glasses, and they listened for a time to the eating sounds from the living room.

"Herbie! I've got it!"

"*Quietly!* Yes?"

Ronald was smiling slyly. "Do you remember that statue we picked up a few months ago?"

"Which? 'The Forbidden Embrace'?"

"And do you remember how heavy it was . . . ?"

Herbert's face broke into a beam. "Of course! We'll club him!"

Ronald blushed. "Club him to death with an *objet d'art*—how excruciatingly *cloche*!"

They shook hands solemnly and went back into the living room.

"Hey-o!" The old man belched mildly, and settled back in the chair. "This here was mighty white of you, boys. Accept an old man's humble thanks. Would you—well, dagnab it, what for a drink on it?"

"Splendid!"

"Here's to a couple of red-blooded American boys!"

They drank.

"Ahhh," the old man said again, refilling the glasses. "Been a time since I tasted lappings good as that. Say, you have got a real nice place here! All them pictures and things, them draperies—real expensive."

Herbert sniffed. "If you find yourself on the stage," he drawled, "then I say, act the part. My parents epitomize the American capitalistic fallacy. Filthy rich, and all that. They throw me a bone from time to time."

"Do tell! Bet you're right fond of them for that, hey?"

"He loathes them," Ronald said, chewing at an olive.

The old man threw down his drink and pointed at a picture of a man with both eyes on one side of his face and no hair. "There's a funny one!"

"Picasso. Original, of course. Should have taken it down *weeks* ago: Picasso doesn't wear well, you know. Have another drink."

They drank again. And the glasses filled again. And another bottle came out of the cupboard.

"Mr. Fogarty," Herbert said, eying a heavy statue which resembled a squashed turnip, "for conversation's sake, would you mind telling us your views on life? We might as well confess to you: we're social directors for the Y. M. C. A."

"I kind of took me a notion that's what you was," the old man said, chuckling. "Life, hey? Well; she's a hard old go. Full of grief for some and joy for others, reckon. Never have rightly figgered her out."

"I imagine," Ronald said, "one must get desperately

tired of it all, when one is as advanced in years as yourself."

"Well, no: not exactly," the old man said.

"Then—you fear death?"

"Don't everybody?"

Herbert sipped at his highball. "'Tis a consummation devoutly to be wish'd," he said. "Would you excuse our rudeness another time? The dishes want drying. No, no—please stay right where you are. It won't take a jiffy, then we'll show you to your bed."

Back in the kitchen, Herbert whispered: "Well?"

"Well what?"

"I mean, what are we waiting for?"

"Oh." Ronald poured out another three fingers of gin with unsteady hands. "You want to do it now?"

"Why not?" Herbert tried to hop up onto the drain-board, but, in hiccuping, didn't quite make it. "He's loaded," he said, confidentially. "Never know what happened."

From the living room came the old man's voice, thick and unclear, in an off key rendition of "That Little Old Red Shawl My Mother Wore."

"Okay," Ronald said, "but let's have just one more toast."

"One more. To the imminent demise of James Oliver Curwood. I mean Fogarty."

The gin was gone, however, so they made recourse to the Scotch.

"Getting along all right, are you, Mr. Fogarty?" Herbert called.

"—it was tatter'd, it was torn, it showed signs of being worn—" the old man sang.

"Poor old schmoe. He doesn't know what he's got coming, huh!"

"Ronnie, stop giggling obscenely. After all, you're about to kill a man."

Ronald stopped giggling. "Who is?" he said, faintly.

"You are, of course."

The younger man stumbled slightly and downed his glass of Scotch. "Now wait, just a minute—"

"What's this, what's this? Don't tell me you don't want to go through with it!"

"Who's telling you that?"

"He'll *hear* us, you silly ape, if you don't quiet down! It's only fair that you should finish the job; after all, I did every bit of the groundwork, didn't I? Are you not my *compagnon de voyage*? I mean, do you or do you not intend to be fair?"

"Certainly, certainly I do. It isn't that."

"Well then?"

"Don't you think we ought to wait a little while first?"

"Impossible. It's almost four o'clock in the morning now. We've got to allow time for disposing of the body, you idiot."

"All right, all right. One more drink!"

Herbert poured out some more Scotch, went into the living room and replenished the old man's drink.

Ronald was weaving a bit, and his glass was empty. "What's the matter?" he said, suddenly. "I don't hear him singing."

Herbert smiled. He had "The Forbidden Embrace" in his hand. "Passed out. *Sic transit gloria mundi*!"

"Did—did you do it?"

"Ronnie, my friend! Am I the sort who would cheat you?"

"Herbert, I have something to tell you."

"Yes, old man?"

"I refuse to rob you of the experience—no, no, I insist: *You* kill him."

"Such self-sacrifice does not fail to move me. Yet, fair is fair. It's quite settled—here's the statue. If you hit him hard, it shouldn't take more than one blow."

Ronald gulped loudly. "A toast, then!"

"To the Well of Experience!"

"To the Well of Experience!"

The Scotch dropped several inches in the bottle.

Ronald grasped "The Forbidden Embrace" in his hand and made a couple of tentative swipes in the air with it. His balance was disturbed and, sitting on the kitchen floor, he said: "Herbie, I just happened to think. I *can't* kill him."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm not twenty-one yet."

"Coward!" Herbert shrieked, and snatched up the

statue. "Sniveling, groveling *petite bourgeois poupon!*"

He dashed through the door into the living room and advanced upon the old man, whose breathing was regular now.

"Farewell!" Herbert cried, raising the statue.

Then he lowered it. But, not on the old man's head.

"The Forbidden Embrace" crashed resoundingly through a stack of buckram-bound esoterica and fell to the floor. As did Herbert.

He said "*Shhh!*" to no one in particular, saw that James Oliver Fogarty still slept undisturbed and crawled back into the kitchen, where Ronald was forcing the cork of a bottle of vin rosé.

"I was assailed suddenly," Herbert said, dribbling the wine into his half-glass of Scotch, tossing it off and grimacing thereafter, "with a thought. May I explain? Though the risk is infinitesimal, nay, minuscule, still we ought to be intelligent about this."

Ronald nodded without enthusiasm.

"Now whereas I am of legal age and therefore subject to punishment as meted out by our savage and pagan society—you aren't. We've got to cover ourselves, you know."

"Absolutely."

"Very well: you must administer the *coup d'état* to our victim; it's air-tight then. On the off chance of something's going wrong, you merely plead juvenile delinquency."

Ronald stared at Herbert for a time. He sloshed some more wine into the glasses. "No," he said.

"No? *No?* Oh yes, I begin to get it now. You want to see me, *Herbie*, your oldest, dearest friend, fry in the chair! That's what you want."

"No, *Herbie*, I don't want that. Honest."

They were quiet, but for the staccato hiccup Ronald had developed.

Herbert was scratching his head madly. "Look here," he said, "we're behaving like children. Like *children!* Let us be mature. Do we have *weltanschauung*, or don't we? Are we ridden with the cheap morality of the herd, or aren't we?"

"Certainly."

"All right! Oh, Ronnie, we've reached a critical stage in our development as thinking people. An *impasse*, as it were. If we falter now, fail in our mission—*think!*—how then face ourselves? How exist with the awful knowledge?"

"How?"

"We would be worse than bourgeois; we would be *common*. We must have the courage of our lack of convictions! To the one side, intellectual freedom; to the other, slavery and eternal subjugation."

"Subjugation."

"Well—which is it, friend of four long years? When the balance hangs on the mere cracking of an old man's skull, which will you have: freedom or slavery?"

"More wine," Ronald said.

"Decide! The hour grows late, you must decide!"

"Sure. Okay. But—you do it, Herbie: I'm nervous."

Herbert Foss summoned a glance of profound contempt. "Weakling!" he yelled. "You may consider our relationship at a *finis*. I will do the deed myself, and if I am caught, then I shall sit in the electric chair a far, far freer man than you, Ronald Raphael. And so shall I die: free, content in my own company. *Drink your filthy wine!*"

Herbert's face glowed a deep, burning red; tiny balls of sweat speckled his forehead, and some of the shoe polish had run from his hair in thin dirty lines down his sallow cheeks. His eyes were large, the pupils bloated and black: he trembled as he snapped his fingers under Ronald's nose. Then he went back into the living room where the old man slept and he stopped trembling completely, for the first time.

He walked over to the fallen statue, picked it up and tested it against his palm. It was very heavy. Heavy enough to crush the bone of any man's skull, however thick, crush and drive the splinters of bone deep down; heavy enough to summon death quickly.

Herbert didn't tremble. He circled the snoring elder, then he sat down in the white campaign chair and reached for one of the glasses. The Scotch within had retained its unwatered light-gold lethal dignity.

Herbert gasped and coughed. From the half-open door

he could see Ronald, slumped on the floor like a wet cotton doll.

He rolled the bright-beaded glass against his brow and stared at the old man. . . .

Daylight limped into the big room and thrashed, sullenly. The gold walls, the black ceiling, the piles of books and records, the whole vast high-timbered, many-leveled apartment looked tremendously different in the cold morning rays.

Sticky glasses littered the soiled rug, and several bottles lay overturned and empty: there was an oversweet smell pervasive, too, settled over everything like a heavy mildew.

"I've gone blind!" Herbert Foss cried, but this was not so: his eyes had stuck together with sleep. He pried the lids apart.

The blood on his hands had almost dried. But not quite.

"Oh, God!"

Ronald was curled up where he had fallen. At the outcry he raised his head and clamped his hands onto his ears. He moaned, softly.

"Ronnie—" Herbert held up his crimsoned hands, then made a sudden leap from the chair: The cloth blazed white around the spots of dark red.

He made a series of short animal noises, put his fingers to his temples, threw his head back and walked in a small circle twice around the room, eyes tightly clenched.

"No," Herbert said. "No. No. No."

At the fourth *No* his foot encountered the broken bottle by the fireplace: a square Scotch bottle, quite empty, splintered at the top, the shards and needles of glass brilliantly covered with wet red. A little trail of glass and blood led to the campaign chair.

"Good God," Herbert cried, "It's all over the place!"

Ronald was staring at the large overstuffed chair, however. He was seized, from time to time, by violent but short spasms.

"Herbie—did we? I mean, did you?"

"I don't know. Don't shout. If we did, you did it. I fell asleep—I remember distinctly."

"What about that blood all over you?"

Herbert shuddered. Then he saw the broken Scotch bottle and rattled out a sigh of high relief. He examined the small cuts on his palm. "I tripped on that glass; I recall."

Ronald covered his eyes. "Oh, my head!" he wailed. "Don't you understand—my *head*! Are you sure you didn't club *me* by mistake?"

The sentence had a sobering effect.

Herbert began to shake with fair regularity, as they stood there, huddled, in the middle of the room.

"Did you—did you see him?" he whispered.

"Who?"

"You know who."

"When?"

"Just now. I'm having a bit of trouble with my eyes. Is he—here with us—?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, *look*."

"I can't seem to focus my eyes—Herbie, *you* look. You're the leader, you're—"

Herbert made fists of his hands, swallowed dryly and opened one eye, revolving his head at the same time.

Then he opened the other eye.

"*Ronnie!*"

Ronald jumped at the sudden sound. He opened his eyes, and together they looked.

Then, they went upstairs to the shelf that served as a bedroom and looked on the bed and under the bed and in the closet. They looked in the kitchen and in the pantry; in the hall closet; in the bathroom and, after some delay, behind the shower curtain.

"Herbie, you don't suppose—I mean, you couldn't have done it and disposed of . . . the . . ."

Herbert's face, already white, turned whiter. "No," he said. "No. No."

"Let's check the car. Let's check the car. I said, let's—"

"Shhh! All right."

They rushed out the back door and through the gar-

den, peering behind palm trees as they hurried, until they had reached the garage.

Whereat they stared first at the open garage, immaculate, dark and empty; then at themselves, and back at the garage.

"My Jaguar," Herbert said, with immense simplicity, "is gone."

They rushed back to the apartment and stood still, except for the trembling.

"The pictures!" Herbert said. "The Picasso! The Motherwell! The Mondrian!"

"The Kuniyoshi," Ronald said.

"Where are they?"

"Look!"

The hall chiffonier sat disarrayed, the drawers, for the most part, empty, pulled out, some of them sprawled on the floor.

"Oh, *not* Mother's silver!" Herbert said.

Slowly then, a bit like somnambulists, they marched through the apartment.

And their words were full of wonder and disbelief.

"Our clothes—*all* our clothes!"

"Dad's luggage!"

"My ring—my *emerald* cuff links!"

A large complacent Buddha smiled above its unlocked belly. The camouflaged strongbox lay open and empty.

"Herbie, my shorts! My shorts are gone, the ones Carmencita gave me!"

And then Herbert Foss and Ronald Raphael stopped looking. They sat down in the living room, the quiet, cold living room, and put their heads on their arms and stayed this way for a very long time.

A Death in the Country

HE HAD BEEN DRIVING FOR 11 HOURS AND HE WAS HUNGRY and hot and tired, but he couldn't stop, he couldn't pull over to the side of the road and stop under one of those giant pines and rest a little while; no. Because, he thought, if you do that, you'll fall asleep. And you'll sleep all night, you know that, Buck, and you'll get into town late, maybe too late to race, and then what will you do?

So he kept on driving, holding a steady 70 down the long straights, and through the sweeping turns that cut through the fat green mountains. He could climb to 80 and stay there and shorten the agony, except that it had begun to rain; and it was the bad kind that is light, like mist, and puts a slick film on the road. At 80 he would have to work. Besides, you have got to take it easy now. He thought, you have got a pretty old mill under the hood, and she's cranky and just about ready to sour out, but she'd better not sour out tomorrow. If she does, you're in a hell of a shape. You know that all right. So let her loaf.

Buck Larsen rolled the window down another three inches and sucked the cool, sharp air into his lungs. It was clean stuff, with a wet pine smell, and it killed the heat some and cleared his head, but he hated it, because rain made it that way. And rain was no good. Sure, it was OK sometimes; it made things grow, and all that; and probably people were saying, by God, that's wonderful, that's great—rain! But they would feel different if they had to race on it, by Christ. It would be another story then. All of a sudden they would look up at the sky and see some dark clouds and their hearts would start pounding then and they'd be scared, you can bet your sweet ass; they'd start praying to God to hold it off just a little while, just a few hours, please. But it would come, anyway. It would come. And that nice dirt track would turn to mush and maybe you're lucky and

you don't total your car out, and maybe this is not one of your lucky days and the money is gone and you don't have a goddamn thing except your car and you make a bid, only the rain has softened the track and somebody has dug a hole where there wasn't any hole a lap ago, and you hit it, and the wheel whips out of your hands and you try to hold it, but it's too late, way too late, and you're going over. You know that. And nothing can stop you, either, not all the lousy prayers in the world, not all the promises; so you hit the cellar fast and hope that the roll bar will hold, hope the doors won't fly open, hope the yoyos in back won't plow into you—only they will, they always do. And when it's all over, and maybe you have a broken arm or a cracked melon, then you begin to wonder what's next, because the car is totaled, and they'll insure a blind airplane pilot before they'll insure you. And you can't blame them much, either. You're not much of a risk.

He shook his head hard, and tried to relax. It was another 60 miles to Grange. Sixty little miles. Nothing. You can do it standing up, you have before; plenty of times. (But you were younger then, remember that. You're 48 now. You're an old bastard, and you're tired and scared of the rain. That's right. You're scared.)

The hell!

Buck Larsen looked up at the slate-colored sky and frowned; then he peered through the misted windshield. A bend was approaching. He planted his foot on the accelerator and entered the curve at 97 miles per hour. The back end of the car began to slide gently to the left. He eased off the throttle, straightened, and fed full power to the wheels. They stuck.

Yeah, he said.

The speedometer needle dipped back to 70 and did not move. It was fine, you're OK, he thought, and you'll put those country fair farmers in your back pocket. You'd better, anyway. Maybe not for a first, but a second; third at worst. Third money ought to be around three hundred. But, he thought, what if the rain spoils the gate? Never mind, it won't. These yokels are wild for blood. A little rain won't stop them.

A sign read: GRANGE-41 MILES.

Buck snapped on his headlights. Traffic was beginning

to clutter up the road, and he was glad of it, in a way; you don't get so worried when there are people around you. He just wished they wouldn't look at him that way, like they'd come to the funeral too early. You sons of bitches, he thought. You don't know me, I'm a stranger to you, but you all want to see me get killed tomorrow. That's what you want, that's why you'll go to the race. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint you. I really am. That's why I ain't popular: I stayed alive too long. (And then he thought, no, that isn't why. The reason you're not popular is because you don't go very good. Come on, Larsen, admit it. Face it. You're old and you're getting slow. You're getting cautious. That's why you don't run in the big events no more, because in those you're a tail-ender; maybe not dead last, but back in the back. Nobody sees you. Nobody pays you. And you work just as hard. So you make the jumps out here, in the sticks, running with the local boys, because you used to be pretty good, you used to be, and you've got a hell of a lot of experience behind you, and you can count on finishing in the money. But you're losing it. The coordination's on the way out; you don't think fast any more, you don't move fast; you don't drive fast.)

A big Lincoln, dipping with the ruts, rolled by. The driver stared. I'm sorry, Buck told him. I'd like to die for you, Buddy, but I just ain't up to it; I been kind of sick, you know how it goes. But come to the track anyway; I mean, you never can tell. Maybe I'll go on my head, maybe I'll fall out and the stinking car will roll over on top of me and they'll have to get me up with a rake. It could happen.

Buck steadied the wheel with his elbows and lit the stump of his cigar. It could happen, OK, he thought. But not to me. Not to Buck Larsen. He clamped his teeth down hard on the cigar, and thought, yeah, that's what Carl Beecham always said: you got to believe it'll never happen to you. Except, Carl was wrong; he found that out—what was it?—four years ago at Bonelli, when he hit the wall and bounced off and went over . . .

He tightened his thick, square fingers on the taped wheel. He pulled down the shutters, fast. Whenever he'd find himself thinking about Carl, or Sandy, or Chick Snyder, or Jim Lonnergan, or any of the others, he would

just pull a cord and giant shutters would come down in his mind and he would stop thinking about them. They had all been friends of his. Now they were dead, or retired and in business for themselves, and he didn't have anyone to go out and have a beer with, or maybe play cards or just fool around; he was alone; and you don't want to make a thing like that worse, do you?

So I'm alone. Lots of people are alone. Lots of people don't even have jobs, not even lousy ones like this.

He told himself that he was in plenty good shape, and did not wonder—as he had once wondered—why, since he hated it, he had ever become a race driver. It was no great mystery. There'd been a dirt track in the town where he grew up. He'd started hanging around the pits, because he liked to watch the cars and listen to the noise. And he was young, but he was a pretty good mechanic anyway so he helped the drivers work on their machines. Then, he couldn't recall who it was, somebody got sick and asked him to drive. It was a thrill, and he hadn't had many thrills before. So he tried it again.

And that was it. He'd been driving ever since; it was the only thing he knew how to do, for Christ's sake. (No, that wasn't true. He could make a living as a mechanic.)

So why don't I? I will. I'll take a few firsts and salt the dough away and start a garage and let the other bastards risk their necks. The hell with it.

The rain grew suddenly fierce, and he rolled up the window angrily. For almost an hour he thought of nothing but the car, mentally checking each part and making sure it was right. God knew he was handicapped enough as it was with a two-year-old engine; it took his know-how to find those extra horses, and still he was short. The other boys would be in new jobs, most of them. More torque. More top end. He'd have to fight some.

Buck slowed to 45, then to 25, and pulled up in front of a gas station. He went to the bathroom, splashed cold water over his face, wiped away some of the grime.

He went to a restaurant and spent one of his remaining six dollars on supper.

Then he took the Chevy to a hotel called The Plantation and locked it up. The rain gleamed on its wrinkled hide, wrinkled from the many battles it had waged, and made it look a little less ugly. But it was ugly, anyhow.

It had a tough, weathered appearance, an appearance of great and disreputable age; and though it bore a certain resemblance to ordinary passenger cars, it was nothing of the kind. It was a stripped-down, tight-sprung, lowered, finely-tuned, balanced savage, a wild beast with a fighter's heart and a fighter's instincts. On the highway, it was a wolf among lambs; and it was only on the track that it felt free and happy and at home.

The Chevy was like Buck Larsen himself, and Buck sensed this. The two of them had been through a lot together. They had come too close too many times. But they were alive, somehow, both of them, now, and they were together, and maybe they were ugly and old and not as fast as the new jobs, but they knew some things, by God, they knew some tricks the hot-dogs would never find out.

Buck glanced at the tires, nodded, and went into the hotel. He left a call for 5:30. The old man at the desk said he wouldn't fail. Buck went to his room, which was small and hot but only cost him three dollars, and what can you expect for that?

He listened to the rain and told it, Look, I'll find second or third tomorrow, you can't stop me, I'm sorry. A man's got to eat.

He switched off the light and fell into a dark black sleep.

When he awoke, he went to the window and saw that the rain had stopped; but it had stopped within the hour, and so it didn't matter. He went out and found a place that was open and ate a light breakfast of toast and coffee.

Then he drove the Chevy the 13 miles out of town to the Soltan track. It sat in the middle of a field that would normally have been dusty but now was like a river bank, the surface slimy with black mud. The track itself was like most others: a fence of gray, rotting boards; a creaking round of hard, splintery benches; a heavy wooden crash wall; and a narrow oval of wet dirt. A big roller was busily tamping it down, but this would do no good. A few hot qualifying laps and the mud would loosen. One short heat and it would be a lake again.

Dawn had just broken, and the gray light washed over the sky. It was quiet, the roller making no sound on the

dirt, the man behind the roller silent and tired. It was cold, too, but Buck stripped off his cloth jacket. He got his tools out of the trunk and laid them on the ground. He removed the car's mufflers first; then, methodically, jacked up the rear end, took off the back left tire and examined it. He checked it for pressure, fitted it back onto the wheel and did the same with the other tires. Then he checked the wheels. Then the brakes.

Soon more cars arrived, and in a while the pits were full. When Buck had finished with the Chevy, when he was as sure as he could ever be that it was right and ready to go, he wiped his big hands on an oily rag and took a look at the competition.

It was going to be rougher than he'd thought. There were two brand new supercharged Fords, a 1957 fuel-injection Chevrolet, three Dodge D-500s, and a hot-looking Plymouth Fury. The remaining automobiles were more standard, several of them crash jobs, almost jalopies, the sides and tops pounded out crudely.

Nineteen, in all.

And I've got to beat at least 17 of them, Buck thought. He walked over to a new Pontiac and looked inside. It was a meek job, real meek. But you can't tell. He examined the name printed on the side of the car: Tommy Linden. Nobody. Then Buck returned to the Chevy. Several hours had passed, and soon it would be 12 o'clock, qualifying time. He'd better get some rest.

He lay down on a canvas tarpaulin and was about to close his eyes, when he saw a young man walking up to the Pontiac. They apparently hadn't heard of the No Females Allowed rule in Soltan, for a girl was with him. She was young, too; maybe 21, 22. And not hard and mannish, like most of them, but soft and light and clean. Some girls always stay clean, Buck thought. No matter what they do, where they are. If Anna-Lee had been more that way (or even a little) maybe he'd of stuck with her. But she was a dog. Why the hell do you marry a damn sloppy broad like that in the first place? God. He looked at the girl and thought of his ex-wife, then focused on the kid. Twenty-five. Handsome, brawny: he thinks he's got a lot, that one. You can usually tell. Look at his eyes.

Buck half-dozed until a loudspeaker announced time

for qualifying; he sat up then and listened to the order of the numbers. Twenty-two, first. Ninety-one, second. Seven, third. He was ninth.

People started running around in the pits; customers drifted up into the grandstands; the speaker blared; then number 22, a yellow Ford, rolled up to the line.

It roared away at the drop of the flag.

When he was called, Buck patted the Chevy, listened to it, and grunted. The track was getting chewed up, but it was still possible to get around quickest time. He eased off the mark slowly as the flag dropped, got up some steam on the backstretch and came thundering across the line with his foot planted. He grazed the south wall slightly on his second try, but it was nothing, only a scratch.

He went to the pits and removed his helmet in time to hear the announcer's voice: "Car number six, driven by Buck Larsen—26:15."

The crowd murmured approval. Buck decided it would be a decent gate and settled down again. The Fury went through at something over 26:15.

Then it was the Pontiac's turn.

"Car number 14, driven by Tommy Linden, up."

The gray car's pipes growled savagely as it rolled out. The track was bad, now. Really bad. Buck felt better: he had second starting position sewed up. No one could drop a hell of a lot off of 26:15 in this soup.

The Pontiac accelerated so hard at take-off that the rear almost slewed around. Easy, 14, Buck thought. Easy. It'll impress the little girl but your ass'll be at the end of the pack.

Number 14 came through the last turn almost sideways, straightened, and screwed across the line. It stuck high on the track, near the wall, at every curve. Buck saw the kid's face as he went by. It was unsmiling. The eyes were fixed straight ahead.

Then it was over, and the loudspeaker roared: "Tommy Linden, number 14, turns it in 26:13!"

Buck frowned. The other supercharged Ford would make it under 26. Sure it would, with that torque.

The kid crawled out of the Pontiac but before he could get his helmet off, the girl in the pink dress jumped from the stack of tires and began to pull awkwardly at the

strap. The kid grinned. "Come on, leave it go," he said, and pushed the girl gently aside. Already his face was dirty, no longer quite so young. He looked at his tires and walked over to Buck. "Hey," he said, "I had somebody fooling with my hat, I didn't get the time. You remember what I turned?"

"26:13," Buck said.

"Not too bad, huh?" the kid said, happily. Then, he spit out his gum. "What'd you turn?"

"26:15."

The kid appraised Buck, looked at his age and the worry in his face. "That's all right," he said, "hell, nothing wrong with that. You been around Soltan before?"

"Not for a while," Buck said.

"Well, like, sometimes I steal a little practice; you know?" He paused. "I'm Tommy Linden, live over to Pinetop."

Buck did not put out his hand. "Larsen," he said.

The young man took another piece of gum from his pocket, unwrapped it, folded it, put it into his mouth. "I'll tell you something," he said. "See, like I told you, I practice here once in a while. I got Andy Gammon's garage backing me—they're in Pinetop?—see, and the thing is, I'm kind of after 36. You know? The blown Ford?"

"Yeah."

"So, what I mean is, if you can pass me, what the hell, go on, know what I mean? But, uh—if you can't, I'd appreciate it if you'd stay out of my way." The kid's eyes looked hard and angry. "I mean I really want me that Ford."

Buck lit his cigar, carefully. "I'll do what I can," he said.

"Thanks a lot," the kid said. Then he winked. "I got the chick along, see. She thinks I'm pretty good. I don't want to let her down; you know?" He slapped Buck's arm and walked back to his car, walked lightly, on the balls of his feet. His jeans were tight and low on his waist and the bottoms were stuffed into a pair of dark boots. He doesn't have a worry, Buck thought. He may be scared, but he's not worried. It's better that way.

The sun began to throb and the heat soaked into Buck's clothes and he began to feel the old impatience, the agony of waiting. Why the hell did they always

take so damn long? he wondered. No reason for it.

He started to walk across the track, but the plate in his leg was acting up—it did that whenever it rained—and he sat down instead. His face was wet; dirt had caked into the shiny scar tissue behind his ear, and perspiration beaded the tips of the black hairs that protruded from his nostrils. He looked over and saw Tommy Linden and the girl in the pink dress. She was whispering something into the kid's ear; he was laughing.

Damn the heat! He wiped his face, turned from Tommy Linden and the girl and rechecked his tires. Then he checked them again. Then it was time for the first race, a five-lap trophy dash. It didn't count for anything.

The race started; the two Fords shot ahead at once; Buck gunned the Chevy and took after them. Number 14 spent too much time spinning its wheels and had to drop behind. But it stayed there, weaving to the right, then to the left, pushing hard. Buck knew he could hold his position—anyone could in a five lapper—but he decided not to take any chances; it didn't mean a goddamn. So he swung wide and let the Pontiac rush past on the inside. It fishtailed violently with the effort, but remained on the track.

Within a couple of minutes it was over, and Buck's Chevy was the only car that had been passed: he'd had no trouble holding off the Mercs, and they kept daylight between themselves and the Fury.

But of course it meant nothing. The short heats were just to fill up time for the crowd; nobody took them seriously.

A bunch of motorcycles went around for 10 laps, softening up the dirt even more; there were two more dashes; and then it was time for the big one—for the 150 lap Main Event.

Once again Buck pulled into line; it was to be an inverted start. Fast cars to the rear, slow cars in front.

He slipped carefully into the shoulder harness, cinched the safety belt tight across his lap, checked the doors, and put on his helmet. It was hot, but he might as well get used to it; he'd have the damn thing on for a long time.

Number 14 skidded slightly beside him, its engine howling. Tommy Linden fitted his helmet on and stretched theatrically. His eyes met Buck's and held.

"You know what?" Linden yelled. "I don't think them two Fords is exactly stock, you know what I mean?"

Buck smiled. The kid's OK, he thought. A pretty nice kid. "Well, are *you*?" he shouted.

"Hell, no!" Linden roared with amusement.

"Me either."

The loudspeaker crackled. "Red Norris will now introduce the drivers!"

Up ahead, the track was like a rained-on mountain trail; great clots of mud and sticky pools of black surfaced it all the way around; there wasn't a clear hard spot anywhere.

Buck glanced over at number 14 and saw Tommy Linden waving up at the grandstand. A middle-aged man waved back. Buck turned away.

"Gonna let me get him?" the kid was pointing at 36.

"Don't ask me! Ask him!"

"Yeah, why don't I do that!"

After the introductions, the official starter walked up with a green flag, furled. The drivers all buckled their helmets. The silence lasted a moment, then was torn by the successive explosions that trembled out of the 19 racing stock cars.

Buck stopped smiling; he stopped thinking of Tommy Linden, of any other human being. He thought only of the moments to come. I'll follow 36 he decided, let it break trail; then I'll hang on. That's all I have to do. Just don't get too damn close to the wall. You don't want to spend time pounding out a door. Be smooth. Hang on to 36 and you're in hardware.

The cars roared like wounded lions for almost a full minute, and some sounded healthy while others coughed enough to show that they were not so healthy; then the man with the flag waved them off, in a bunch, for the rolling start. Buck could see the Pontiac straining at the leash, inching forward, and he kept level. They circulated slowly around, the starter judged them, he judged they were all right, and gave them the flag.

It was a race.

Buck immediately cut his wheel for a quick nip inside the Pontiac, but the kid was quicker; he'd anticipated the move and edged to the right to hold Buck off. At the first turn, number 14 threw its rear around viciously, and

Buck knew he'd have to kiss the wall and bull through or drop back. He dropped back. There was plenty of time.

He followed the Pontiac closely, but he found that it was not so easy after all. The car cowboied through every turn, scaring off the tail-enders, and it was everything he could do to hang on. Ahead, the Fords were threading their way through traffic with great ease, leaving a wake of thick mud.

He relaxed some and allowed the long years of his experience to guide the car. Gradually the Pontiac was picking off the stragglers; within 15 minutes it had passed the sixth place Mercury, and was drawing up on five.

You better not try it, Buck said. Those boys aren't working too hard. They can go a lot faster. I hope you know that.

But the Pontiac didn't settle down, it didn't slacken its pace any, and Buck knew that he would have to revise his strategy. He'd planned to wait for number 14 to realize that it couldn't hope for better than a third; then he was going to bluff him. You can bluff them when the fever's passed, when they're not all out, driving hard.

But he could see that he wasn't going to be able to bluff the Pontiac. He could only outdrive him, nerf him a little, maybe, shake him up, cause him to bobble that one time, and then streak by.

Once the decision was made, Buck moved well back in the seat. They were about halfway through now. Give it seven more laps; then make the bid.

He swung past a beat-up Dodge on the north turn and was about to correct when the driver lost it. The Dodge went into a frenzied spin, skimmed across the muddy track and bounded off the wall. Buck yanked his tape-covered wheel violently to the left, then to the right, and managed to avoid the car. Damn! Now number 14 was four up and going like the wind. Well. Buck put his bumper next to the Merc in front of him and stabbed the accelerator. The Merc wavered, moved over; Buck went by. It worked on the second car, too; and he was in position to catch 14 as it was passing a Ford on the short straight.

He waited another three laps, until they were out of the traffic somewhat, and began to ride the Pontiac's tail. They both hit a deep rut and fishtailed, but no more than 3 inches of daylight showed between them. Buck tried

to pass on the west turn by swinging left and going in deeper, but the Pontiac saw him and went just as deep; both missed the wall by less than a foot.

Perspiration began to course down Buck's forehead, and when he tried nerfing 14, and found that it wouldn't work, that 14 wasn't going to scare, the thought suddenly brushed his mind that perhaps he would not finish third after all. But if he didn't, then he wouldn't be able to pay for gas to the next town or for a hotel, even, or anything.

His shoulders hunched forward, and Buck Larsen began to drive; not the way he had been driving for the past two years, but as he used to, when he was young and worried about very little, when he had friends, women.

"You want to impress your girlfriend," he said to the Pontiac.

"I just want to go on eating."

He made five more passes during the following six laps, and twice he almost made it, but the track was just a little too short, a little too narrow, and he was forced to drop behind each time.

When he was almost certain that the race was nearing its finish, he realized that other tactics would have to be used. He clung to 14's bumper through the traffic on the straight; then, as they dived into the south turn, he hung back for a fraction of a second—long enough to put a bit of space between them. Then he pulled down onto the inside and pushed the accelerator flat. The Chevy jumped forward; in a moment it was nearly even with the Pontiac.

Buck considered nothing whatever except keeping his car in control; he knew that the two of them were at that spot, right there, where one would have to give; but he didn't consider any of this.

The two cars entered the turn together, and the crowd screamed and some of the people got to their feet and some closed their eyes. Because neither car was letting off.

Buck did not move his foot on the pedal; he did not look at the driver to his right; he plunged deeper, and deeper, up to the point where he knew that he would lose control, even under the best of conditions; the edge, the final thin edge of destruction.

He stared straight ahead and fought the wheel through the turn, whipping it back and forth, correcting, correcting. Then, it was all over.

He was through the turn; and he was through first.

He didn't see much of the accident: only a glimpse, in his rear view mirror, a brief flash of the Pontiac swerving to miss the wall, losing control, going up high on its nose and teetering there . . .

A flag stopped the race. The other cars had crashed into the Pontiac, and number 14 was on fire. It wasn't really a bad fire, at first, but the automobile had landed on its right side, and the left side was bolted and there were bars on the window, so they had to get it cooled off before they could pull the driver out.

He hadn't broken any bones. But something had happened to the fuel line and the hood had snapped open and the windshield had collapsed and some gasoline had splashed onto Tommy Linden's shirt. The fumes had caught and he'd burned long enough.

He was dead before they got him into the ambulance.

Buck Larsen looked at the girl in the pink dress and tried to think of something to say, but there wasn't anything to say; there never was.

He collected his money for third place—it amounted to \$350—and put the mufflers back on the Chevy and drove away from the race track, out onto the long highway.

The wind was hot on his face, and soon he was tired and hungry again; but he didn't stop, because if he stopped he'd sleep, and he didn't want to sleep, not yet. He thought one time of number 14, then he lowered the shutters and didn't think any more.

He drove at a steady 70 miles per hour and listened to the whine of the engine. She would be all right for another couple of runs, he could tell, but then he would have to tear her down.

Maybe not, though.

Maybe not.

AFTERWORD

It is fitting that Ray Bradbury and myself should write the foreword and afterword for this collection of short stories by Chuck Beaumont.

For one thing, it was Ray who helped both Chuck and myself on the initial steps of our writing careers—as he has helped others. I was living in Brooklyn at the time, just graduated from college, and Ray was highly generous in his correspondence and encouragement. It meant a good deal to me. Chuck, fortunate enough to be living in Los Angeles, had more personal contact with Ray and, accordingly, enjoyed an even closer communication and a greater proportion of encouragement and inspiration. I know that it meant a good deal to him as well.

For another thing, Chuck Beaumont, as well as continuing to see Ray throughout the years—as I have—has been, since 1951, one of my very closest friends. Our writing careers have paralleled each other's to a remarkable degree. While I sold some stories first, Chuck very soon caught up with and passed me in production and in sales. Soon we were matching collection for collection, novel for novel. We both produced what is referred to as the "mainstream" novel at approximately the same time: Chuck's *The Intruder*, my *The Beardless Warriors*.

In 1959, we both joined what was then the Preminger-Stuart Agency in Hollywood and began a simultaneous assault on television. In the beginning, we collaborated on scripts, partly for purposes of learning the craft together, mostly (I suspect) for purposes of mutual moral support. After a while we began writing on our own, mostly for Rod Serling's *Twilight Zone*. Next came motion pictures and, again, while I had made the plunge first, Chuck soon surpassed me. (At the date of this writing, a major film he co-wrote entitled *Mister Moses* is yet to

AFTERWORD

be released; already in his background is *The Wonderful World of the Brothers Grimm* and *The Seven Faces of Dr. Lao*.) We wrote a film together based on Fritz Leiber's famous fantasy novel *Conjure Wife*. We wrote, separately, the majority of the Edgar Allan Poe films produced by American-International Pictures.

With all this is a long-standing personal relationship between Chuck and his lovely wife Helen and my wife Ruth and myself—as well as between their children and ours; a relationship that has been very important to us all.

How many writers at the age of 36 have managed to create such a body of work? Endless dozens of stories alight with the magic of a truly extraordinary imagination. Stories shot through with veins of coruscating wit. Stories profound and moving—others feather-light and dancing on a wind of jest. Stories marked by insight, foresight, and that unique, half-frightening, totally exhilarating secret sight that belongs only to those few who are the masters of the tale fantastical.

Charles Beaumont has given us flashes of the wondrous and delightful. He has held up to us a dark-rimmed funhouse mirror so that we might see our distorted—and yet, somehow, much more truthful—images. He has enlightened us. He has stimulated us. Above all, he has entertained us and given us joy. He will do the same for others.

RICHARD MATHESON

Los Angeles, Calif.
April, 1965

CHARLES BEAUMONT —A MASTER OF THE TALE FANTASTICAL

"How many writers at the age of 36 have managed to create such a body of work? Endless dozens of stories alight with the magic of a truly extraordinary imagination. Stories shot through with veins of coruscating wit.

Stories profound and moving — others feather-light and dancing on a wind of jest.

Stories marked by insight, foresight and that unique, half-frightening, totally exhilarating secret sight which belongs only to those few who are the masters of the tale fantastical."

—FROM THE AFTERWORD BY
RICHARD MATHESON

FAWCETT
WORLD
LIBRARY